

## **SERMON: Sunday – 23 January 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **Holy Now!**

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10  
Luke 4:14-21

Let the closing words of Psalm 19 be our prayer for illumination.

May the words of my mouth  
and the meditation of our hearts  
be pleasing to you,  
O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Let your light shine in our hearts and minds.

Filled with the power of the Spirit, Jesus returned to Nazareth where he began to teach in the synagogue. As was the custom, he stood to read the words of the prophet then sat down to interpret the words he'd just read. A reminder to preachers that there are the Scriptures and there is the interpretation, which is, in a sense, less important in that it is only ever one person's interpretation. It might be right but it might be wrong. But I'll come back to interpretation in a minute.

Jesus' ground breaking message was simply that good news, freedom and recovery are "today fulfilled in your hearing". In other words, in this present moment, this day, this moment is holy. Christ is present in it. Here to interpret for us, in us, through us.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he (God) has anointed me. No doubt some who heard would be saying 'who does he think he is to claim the inspiration of the Spirit in such a way? Isn't he Joseph's son? We know where he came from. He can't be anything special'.

Jesus came to correct such thinking. To widen the tent of understanding how God is present in all of creation; how all of life is sacred, infused with holiness, here and now.

Today (semeron) is being completed (perfect tense, continuing, peplerostai). It's a present reality, going on at this moment and continually going on at every moment. It's always now. Every moment is infused with the divine presence. That's what Jesus is saying. The earth is filled with divine holiness.

This is the day and now is the time. This is the year of the Lord's favour.

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.”

A couple of things to say about this:

Firstly, I suppose it only really becomes so when such a divine word is responded to with our “yes, amen, let it be so”. In the absence of such a response, the moment remains unholy to us.

It's like any relationship - there's the first move then there's the necessary response. Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.

Nehemiah, the governor and Ezra, the priest, urged the people of Israel to rejoice this day for “today is a sacred day to the Lord”, “a holy day”, a qadosh day in the Hebrew, meaning sacred or holy.

And the people responded with the necessary agreement, consent, as we shall see.

But first, a wee bit of context for Nehemiah. Nehemiah, a Jew, is born in exile and becomes cup bearer for the king of Persia, Artaxerxes.

Like any good Jew he longs for his homeland and is eager for news from Judah.

He mourns when he hears of the trouble and disgrace that still exists in Jerusalem - the city walls broken down and famine raging - despite this being some 70 years after some of the Jews began to return to Judah. Nehemiah decides to fast and pray to God.

Now, he has to play the long game, as often happens with prayer. It's some 4 months of fasting and praying later that he gets the opportunity to speak to the king and the king is sympathetic and agrees to allow Nehemiah to return to Judah to rebuild the broken walls, which he manages to get done in an amazing 52 days despite some heavy opposition.

A wee comment on the nature of work. All work is holy, whether it appears so or not. Remember what Jesus said, whatever you do, do it as if working for the Lord.

Eugene Peterson in his introduction to the Message translation said,

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“It is common for us to refer to the work of pastors, priests and missionaries as “sacred,” and that of lawyers, farmers and engineers as “secular.” It is wrong. Work, by its very nature, is holy. The biblical story is dominated by people who have jobs in gardening, shepherding, the military, politics, carpentry, tent making, homemaking, fishing and more.”

Nehemiah remains in Jerusalem for some 12 years as governor before going back to Susa and the Persian king he served.

When the rebuilding of the walls is complete, Ezra reads from the Book of the Law, the Book of Moses, Genesis to Deuteronomy.

5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. 6 Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground

Secondly, the interpretation of the Scriptures, the Divine Word mattered in both Nehemiah and in Jesus in Luke 4.

8 So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

9 And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. 10 Then he said to them, “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

The people needed to hear good news. In a time of famine but rebuilding, the people needed to hear that God was the God of favour not harsh and demanding. They needed to know that it was ok to be joyful in the presence of God and people. Not just ok but commanded.

It was good to drink wine and eat good food and share with those who had little out none.

They needed to know that there was a holiness in their ordinary lives. And that holiness was working in them and through them to bring justice and joy.

Debie Thomas wrote about this earlier this week. She said this:

If your pastor told you to feast, celebrate, and rejoice right now, because today is a day “holy to the Lord,” how would you respond? If one of your spiritual mentors insisted that this year — 2022 — is “the year of the Lord’s favor,” what would you say?

I’ll be honest; I would say, “You’ve got to be kidding me. This year? This one? Today? Right now? How can that possibly be?”

I don’t think I’d be alone in my skepticism. As I type these words, Omicron is overwhelming the planet. Hospitals are reaching capacity, physicians and nurses are exhausted, national and local economies are flailing, and Covid’s death toll continues to rise. And this is before we mention any of the other challenges facing us. Wars and threats of wars. Violence of all stripes. The catastrophic effects of climate change. The long shadow of racial injustice. Alarming breakdowns in civility and basic kindness. Rising epidemics of anxiety, depression, addiction, and despair.

Who on earth would reasonably call our current moment holy, or favored of God?

<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2503>

Who indeed? But that is what were invited to do. To glimpse the holy in the mundane. To see the sacred in the messiness.

So, in summary, the Word of God must firstly be received with an amen and secondly, must be interpreted as good news for all, rich and poor.

And thirdly, good news is not to be kept to oneself.

We are to, in the words of Nehemiah,

“send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared” (8:10).

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Amen. There is good news. Let’s share.

A simple message and easy enough to share in a world hungry for good news and in need of the rebuilding of brokenness.

The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem in the time of Nehemiah may well have been done in record time - try getting a builder to do such a task in 52 days today - but the work of rebuilding the nation was far from complete. There was lots to do. The famine still raged. There was inequality and corruption. New laws had to be enacted. Perhaps this is why Nehemiah finds himself there for another 12 years, so that, motivated and moved by the Spirit, he could begin to put in place a better way of life for all.

The good news is for all. I wonder how we, motivated and moved by the same Spirit who motivated and moved Nehemiah and Ezra and Jesus, might share it today with those who yet have nothing.

May we pray?