

Towards the Sunday of the Word of God 2022
LISTENING TO WORDS OF LIFE
TO LIVE AS HUMAN BEINGS

To read the biblical texts in themselves

by Adrian Graffy

It would be difficult, I think, to find readings more appropriate for the Sunday of the Word of God than those which will be proclaimed this year. Let us focus in particular on the first and third readings: a passage from Nehemiah 8 and a composite passage from the gospel according to Luke.

Both readings contain what we might describe as ‘liturgies of the Word’: the reading of the Torah by Ezra and its interpretation, and the reading of Isaiah 61 by Jesus and his interpretation of that text as being fulfilled. Both readings are followed by the reactions of the people.

Furthermore, we have, in these two pieces of Scripture, one which, it might be argued, comes from one of the most obscure books of the Bible, the Book of Nehemiah, and one which is taken from one of the most celebrated and well-known books, the Gospel according to Luke.

Sunday by Sunday we are accustomed to hear readings with which we are familiar, and others which remain obscure to us. The Word of God always invites us to new things.

Nehemiah 8

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are considered to be based on the reports of two individuals sent by the Persian king Artaxerxes to Jerusalem, in the time after the return from exile in Babylon. The prophet Haggai has preached, and the temple has been rebuilt, even though in less glorious a way.

Ezra the scribe was sent around 458 BC, and Nehemiah the governor around 445 BC.

The reading from Nehemiah 8 reports on the activity of Ezra on one particular occasion. Ezra is determined to advance adherence to the Law, while Nehemiah, an official at the Persian court, supervises the rebuilding of the walls. Nehemiah is of course a Jew – the account of his seeking permission of king Artaxerxes to assist in the rebuilding of the walls is found in Neh 2.

In Nehemiah 8 the priest Ezra leads the action while Nehemiah is there to assist. It is the first day of the seventh month – the feast of *rosh hashshannah* – the New Year. An appropriate time for renewal and a new start.

The crowd is described as consisting of ‘men, women and all those old enough to understand’. It invokes the parish liturgy in which the texts of Scripture are proclaimed to all, and the preacher has everyone in mind when explaining the text.

The reading of the Torah takes place in the open ‘in the square in front of the

Water Gate’, a location on the east side of the city. It may be asked why the reading did not take place in the temple area. The Torah embraces both the sacred and the secular, and the reading aloud of the Law in a secular environment, even though in a liturgy, illustrates this. The Persian policy of respecting the local religion in client states is seen to be beneficial. Religion has its place both inside and outside sacred locations.

The length of time taken to read from the scroll of the Torah – from dawn to noon – has led some to suggest that Ezra read the whole Pentateuch. This of course avoids the question about what parts of the Torah were completed at this stage, and whether they could possibly have been brought together by this time. What is important is the symbolism of the Torah being solemnly proclaimed and received by the people’s acclamation.

Despite the secular setting we have liturgical furniture – a ‘wooden dais’ erected for the purpose. One cannot help but recall the wicked Haman’s erection of a scaffold in the book of Esther. The secular space is for good, not for ill.

V. 4 is omitted in the liturgical reading due to the list of 13 Hebrew names but it illustrates the size of the dais and that the priest Ezra has the support of 13 individuals from the secular community, for there is no mention of any religious status. Perhaps it is strange there are 13, until we consider the appropriate number 12 with a leader.

As Ezra opens the scroll ‘in full view of all the people’, ‘all the people’ stand up. There is full and enthusiastic participation in listening to the word of God. Such respect for the word of the Torah is reflected in Christian reading and listening to the gospel. Ezra pronounces a blessing: *barukh ‘attah Adonai melek ha’olam* – we can imagine how the text might have run, and recall the prayers of blessing at the offertory at Mass. The reaction of the people is to raise their hands and to cry out ‘Amen! Amen!’, then to bow down face to the ground ‘before the Lord’, the Lord who speaks in the holy word.

Verse 8 tells us that Ezra read from the scroll ‘translating and giving the sense’. The text was in the sacred language Hebrew, but the people spoke Aramaic – so this first evidence of translation into the vernacular is witness to the need that people should not struggle with liturgical texts but receive them in language familiar to them.

Verse 9: Nehemiah the governor appears with the priest-scribe Ezra instructing the people. Sacred and secular leadership share the task of inspiring the people. They not only instruct, they also console. ‘Today is a sacred day!’ ‘Do not weep!’ The people were in tears for they realised the Law had not been observed in its fullness. They were still traumatised by the events of their history.

This liturgy of the word ends with instructions about how the day should be spent, with rich food, and sweet wine, not forgetting those who are in need. Above all: ‘do not be sad: the joy of the Lord is your stronghold!’.

Luke 4

After his account of the temptations of Jesus, and the devil leaving him ‘until the opportune moment’, Luke has Jesus return to Galilee ‘in the power of the Spirit’. No surprise then that when he enters the synagogue at Nazareth on the sabbath day he should be given the text of Isaiah 61 to proclaim.

Jesus stands up to read, just as Ezra had, and proclaims: ‘The spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me.’ The Spirit had been given at his baptism by John ‘in bodily form’ in Luke’s presentation of the scene.

The visit of Jesus to Nazareth is found in each of the synoptic gospels, but in Luke it is transformed into a programmatic description of the whole ministry. Once Jesus has read the text of Isaiah 61 verses 1-2a Jesus affirms, as the climax of the scene: ‘this text is fulfilled as you listen’. The magnitude of this claim – that he is the fulfilment of prophecy, by way of what might be called the ‘servant song’ of Third Isaiah – is enough to change the atmosphere, but not quite yet. Luke will first of all affirm that they were impressed by the ‘words of grace’ that came from his mouth.

Luke then inserts another element found more extensively in Matthew and Mark when they report on Jesus’ visit to Nazareth in Matthew 13 and Mark 6. In Luke 4 the atmosphere is becoming more challenging, as Luke brings into his programmatic summary some negative reaction to Jesus. ‘Is not this the son of Joseph?’ Matthew and Mark had a series of questions, which Luke has reduced to just one. In the other synoptics we have: ‘where did the man get all this? What is this wisdom and what are these works of power? Isn’t this the carpenter, the son of Mary, with brothers and sisters among us?’ Luke, as is his

habit, reduces the antagonism, and yet must include this dimension to give an honest survey of the ministry.

Jesus then quotes the proverbs ‘heal yourself, physician’ and ‘a prophet is never accepted in his own country’. Why won’t Jesus work miracles in Nazareth? What really annoys them is his reference to Elijah providing food for the pagan widow of Zarephath, and Elisha healing the Syrian leper Naaman. Like them Jesus will not hesitate to heal the foreigner: the servant of the centurion (Luke 7) and the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7). It is this challenge to their sense of being exclusive, a chosen people like no other, that enrages them. Violence ensues but Jesus escapes.

The arrangement of our lectionary spreads Luke’s text of the visit to Nazareth (4:16-30) over the 3rd and 4th Sundays in Year C, because before those initial verses of the visit to Nazareth (ending with ‘Today this text is fulfilled as you listen’) the lectionary reading for the third Sunday starts with the four opening verses of chapter 1 of Luke.

Perhaps this is a rather unsatisfactory arrangement. It is difficult to see how one could combine 1:1-4 and 4:16-21 in a homily – except by keeping the two texts separate.

Nevertheless Luke 1:1-4 is a precious text, and not unsuitable for the Sunday of the Word of God. It allows us to enter into Luke’s mind and learn about his method. He writes it all down for Theophilus, the ‘one who loves God’, perhaps an actual catechumen or convert or perhaps an ideal figure of the seeker after the truth of the gospel. For Luke is explaining his method in compiling the gospel in a way which can be connected with what the Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican II *Dei Verbum* says about the composition of the gospels. It is easily related to the three stages of the composition of the gospels: the works and words of Jesus; the oral preaching about him; and the writing down of gospels, which relate to each other in sometimes complex ways.

In Luke 1:1-4 the principal assertions are these: that many others have already written gospels; that these gospels drew on the oral tradition; that Luke in his turn decided to do the same; that he checked things out carefully in order to produce an ‘ordered’ account. All this so that ‘you may know the truth about the teaching you have received’. He wants us to know that what we are reading is ‘reliable’, not in a simplistic historical sense, but that it proclaims the truth about Jesus Christ.

On the Sunday of the Word of God, therefore, we have testimony to the proclamation of Scripture to a large congregation still hurting from the experiences of destruction and exile, yearning to hear words of consolation and challenge. How many communities in the world of today yearn for such encouragement and to be strengthened by ‘the consolation of the Scriptures’!

We have a clear statement put on the very lips of Jesus that Scripture is fulfilled with his coming. How the peoples of the world search for truth and justice and await reliable prophets who speak the truth of God! And lastly we are given a glimpse of the method followed by the great evangelist Luke to make known to us the reliability of the gospel. How precious is the work of exegetes and scholars, of preachers and catechists, in ensuring that the word of the Lord grows and prospers to the glory of God and for the good of God’s peoples and all creation!