

Nehemiah 8: 1-3 & 8-12

8 ¹ all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. ² Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³ He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

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.' ¹¹ So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, 'Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.' ¹² And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

Galatians 5:13 – 16 & 22-25

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' ¹⁵ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. ¹⁶ So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

During his earthly ministry Jesus asked a very good question: When the son of man returns will he find faith on the earth? Will faith – specifically Christian faith - survive?

Today we look briefly at the period after the Exiles returned from Babylon and up to the end of the Old Testament. This time began with great spiritual fervour but by the time of the book of Malachi everyone – maybe even God – was suffering from burn-out. God was preparing the people for something else. Essentially that was the New Testament/Covenant through the person Jesus.

Three hundred years later, when the Biblical story re-emerged the Jewish faith was still vigorously practiced. Even when the Temple was destroyed in 70AD and through the centuries with all sorts of opposition the Faith of the Jews remains. This led me to think what it was that we might learn from this time and from their enduring faith. What was happening which helped faith to survive for them?

At the time we read of today there was a massive re-building programme going on as the Temple was re-built and then the walls of Jerusalem. But more important than the temple and more important than the security of the capital city, the law began to be emphasised maybe more than the temple practices. The law always held the idea of lifestyle practices. It was not just learning the law for the sake of it. The law was what made them distinct from other nations.

By the time of Jesus the temple system continued, but alongside this there was a strong network of Synagogues across the villages and towns of the nation. While people pilgrimaged to the Temple, the main place for the transmission of the faith was in Synagogues, so when the temple was demolished and animal sacrifices ended it didn't destroy their faith because in a sense it had already been decentralised out to the "grass-roots". This kept the faith close in the local communities where it was centred around local Rabbis. Even closer in was the emphasis on the teaching in the homes. It was there that the traditions were kept alive. This is still the same today. In areas where there are no synagogues the people gather in localised groups in Shuls and the traditions are kept alive in the home.

Lets look at some points from the text and from this transitional time in Israel's history.

A focus on teaching the faith: wow can you imagine it in the heat of the day, Ezra along with other Levites read and explained the Scriptures – 'from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.' Early morning what's the 6am? 6 until mid-day? 6 hours? Maybe that's a bit ambitious. Lets say for four hours the people listened to the law being read and explained by a tag team of teachers of the law. And listen to this the people payed attention to it! No TV you see. No it was not that. It was at least in part because

the people had been starved of the scriptures for so long that they were hungry to hear it and to learn from it.

The reading of scripture with explanation. Yes there are many ways we can do this through many different media, but still today, the need is for us to read and understand God's word.

Especially this is to be encouraged in the home. The church needs to work hard on resourcing our families so that they can teach the truths and duties of the Christian faith in the family context. Once a week in church or in a home group is not enough it is a daily rhythm. .

Remember the instruction after the command love the lord with all your heart and mind and strength? ⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Deut 6:4. I forget where I heard this, this week, but a comment one report on young people and faith which said that in America the Mormon faith was out-doing the Christian church in retention of its young people in their faith into adult life. Why? Because of their very deliberate teaching policy, especially as it was encouraged in the home.

So we need to read and understand scripture, but it does not stop there. The purpose of the law in Israel was not as an interesting piece of learning, it was to inform them as to how to live. When the people heard the law read they wept. Why? Because they were brought face to face with all the ways they were not living by the law God had given them.

But in a beautiful piece of grace, instead of leaving the people there weeping and grieving, they were sent away to feast and celebrate. God hadn't abandoned them, even though they had forgotten him. The right response was to celebrate together the goodness of God.

Notice just a little comment in our text. The people were to leave and go and prepare meals and they were to – 'send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared'. An underlying principal of the law was that everyone was included. No one feasted while others went hungry. If the law was lived out properly there would be no people begging on corners, no people sleeping on the streets. There would be care for everyone and enough to go around. Its not just about knowing scripture it is about living it. Especially, for us, the emphasis is on living out the teaching of Jesus. We walk in his footprints. Out of our love for God we live out the second command – love neighbour as self. Treating others as we want to be treated, serving all.

I was at a combined churches prayer breakfast last week and the Mayor elect Phil Goff spoke briefly mentioning influences in his life. He told the story of Joseph

Savage who when he became prime minister was asked what his policy was and he replied with two words - Applied Christianity.

A good question is where is the classroom for faith? St Peters Youth I want to see how far Rob has backslidden. One of the things which was happening at St Peters before my time were serving events. I remember we might ask who in the church needed a hand around home and we'd spend a 1/2 day in peoples homes cleaning or weeding or trimming. Often it involved playing with their cats and drinking cups of tea which was all a part of it. We'd get 40 people say to a master-chef cooking night which was great fun. We might get 10-15 to a serving event sometimes even less, but the young people regularly said they got more out of going and serving than they did out of many night at youth group – that is why what you've done this weekend is so good. You're living out your faith and in the process you are learning what it means to be Jesus' hands and feet in today's world.

A focus on gathered community, maybe there is greater strength in small clusters of believers. The people were sent away to prepare feasts of the very best food, and to eat together. We didn't get that far in the text but they spent a whole week of it. Feasting on the best. What happens around the table? I want to suggest two things. Firstly the stories come out... Oh do you remember when... these are the stories of our lives, the stories of our struggles and of our faith journeys. If the food and drink have done their job, then the tongues will be loosened and the stories will flow.

Secondly old rivalries are dropped. Its difficult to hold onto grudges when we hear each other's stories and when we share our own and we take time to understand where each other is coming from. Eating together is vital for community formation – and also as it is in Jewish tradition the passing on of the faith. Acknowledge the presence of God in your shared meals and see what richness unfolds.

When we get to the Early Church and to the Holy Spirit who Jesus promised to send we have the results – the fruit of the Spirit. Ultimately the revival of the law and the re-establishment of the temple system were only temporary. The people became tired of all the requirements of the law. The more they tried to keep it the more it was obvious that you can't live by law. No one can keep the law all the time.

Instead God promised to send his Spirit Ezekiel 36: ²⁶I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

The change which faith in Jesus brings is a change from the inside. His Spirit acts to change our hearts and the results are that there is formed in us the nature

of Jesus the nature of God: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

We don't know what the Church will be like in 30 or 300 years' time, but if it is going to survive then, taking the lead from the passage before us today then it needs to focus on these things. Teaching the faith in ways in which it is real in everyday life, gathering in community where the stories of faith are kept alive and passed on and accepting the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives to change and make us more like Jesus.