



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

The people were in tears as they listened to the words of the Law

Readings: Nehemiah 8:2-6, 8-10, Ps 18, 1 Corinthians 12:12-30, Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21

Today's Old Testament passage always brings a smile to my face and reminds of a very remarkable pilgrimage I once made. It was to old Yugoslavia before the war that disfigured Europe and exposed the ancient faultlines of Christendom.

We were travelling through the heartlands of the Orthodox, the centres of resistance to Fascism, among its monasteries in mountain fastness and its remote village churches. In twenty-one days we attended seventeen three hour liturgies and one five-hour consecration of a bishop. I'm not sure I could do it now, not least because it is all standing.

So when I hear again of Ezra's long service, from dawn to midday, my mind goes back to the epic pilgrimage.

It is also the source of more contemporary amusement because now, being a Catholic, I am aware that I inhabit a culture where, for too many, if the Mass exceeds an hour it is considered a mortal sin. And, as an old priest advised me early on, when it comes to homilies remember the egg-

timer. The attention span of too many is five minutes and after seven they are hard boiled. Indeed, I once arrived in the sacristy of a church to be informed by an aggressive middle-aged lady that she hoped the homily and mass would not be too long as she had to get home to prepare lunch for her guests. I advised that she would be best to leave now as I was sure that Jesus wouldn't want to interfere with her dining arrangements.

Relax.....this one comes in at eight minutes. Ezra would have hardly got started.

The background of Ezra's marathon performance will give us a clue as to why the congregation were prepared to stand for five hours in the growing heat of the day. Actually it's only what you see at Papal audiences, the square rammed from early morning. The People of God now assembled in the square of the Water Gate before Ezra were those returned from the long exile.

In the time of Isaiah the Northern Kingdom of Israel, disobedient to God, had fallen and been swept away by the brutal Assyrians. They became the lost ten tribes of Israel, assimilated into the pagan empire, never to return. In the time of Jeremiah the little remnant Southern kingdom of Judah, disobedient to God, was swept away by the great armies of Babylon, the king blinded, his sons murdered and the people led in chains to a far off land. There, miraculously, in exile they began to reconstitute their identity, to study God's Word and to long for a return to the land and the rebuilding of their ruined city and the shattered Temple. With no Temple worship possible in Babylon their worship focussed on the Holy Scripture and the development of what, during the long exile after the fall to Rome in A.D. 70, was eventually to become Synagogue worship.

Because of the return to faithfulness God heard their prayer and honoured His promise of return. But the little community had fallen on hard times. The cupbearer of the Babylonian king, Nehemiah, was asked why he was so sad. He explained his sorrow at the fall and ruin of Jerusalem. In an act of compassion and mercy his lord sent him back to rebuild.

Surrounded by enemies on every side Nehemiah undertook the task. The returnees built the walls with bricks in one hand and a sword in the other. Not all the exiles wanted to return. Some had become comfortable and established in Babylon. The nobility were notably indifferent or hostile. But the miracle was accomplished. The walls were rebuilt and the community with it. Up until the little community of the returned had struggled and been under external threat. In addition they were under internal spiritual threat. They were desecrating the Sabbath with shopping. They were 'marrying out' – taking wives from among the pagan population – always the short route to not bringing children up in the Faith and lapsing into idolatry.

While Nehemiah rebuilt the walls, Ezra sought to rebuild the Jewish community. God has given them back their land and their future as a people. When Ezra and Nehemiah arrived the people were in danger of, once again, throwing it all away.

So the moment, the long morning at the Water Gate is a watershed for the People of God. Ezra reminds them of who they are. He recalls their history and their identity and the saving mercy of God that has brought them back from the brink of obliteration. He employs the full majesty of the revelation of the Word of God and reassures them of God's unswerving purpose for their salvation.

The response of the people is to weep for their sins and to prostrate themselves before the Word in a sign of loving submission to their God. But Ezra tells them not to weep any more for this is a day of rejoicing. They have returned. They have listened to God's Word. They are rebuilding the holy place and restoring the holy people. They are penitent, obedient, submitted utterly to the will of God who can renew all things. What we see here is the ancient pattern of salvation which will find its apogee and explanation in the final revelation of the Word, incarnate in Jesus Christ.

What we see here is the pattern of our lives through the ministry of the sacraments. Returned, reconciled, restored, we are once again His People. Sorrowful for our sins, submitted to the Word, we are exhorted to rejoice and celebrate the feast in the knowledge of God's love for us in Christ. It is what we do at Mass.

Encouraging His people to be faithful, confident and joyful is what God does for us at Mass. As we commit ourselves anew to Him He places Himself in our hands and invites us to the feast of Heaven. So, Rejoice.

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