

## A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Epiphany 3.C

2019

Nehemiah 8.1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Luke 4.14-21

### The Joy of the Lord is your strength

I wonder if you've ever had the experience of being told a series of home-truths about yourself: when you felt fairly pleased with yourself, someone decided to take the veil from your eyes, and show you the many ways in which you've gone wrong – the mistakes you've made – the responsibility you bear for the difficulties you may find yourself in – the trouble you cause for others.

What have you felt at such a time?...

It can be a bracing experience... a humbling one...one that takes away your self-confidence, or even reduces you to despair.

Have you ever been put in that position?

If so, maybe you wanted the ground to swallow you up – you may have felt very, very sorry; or, on the other hand, maybe you felt resentful, and argued back (whether directly to the person telling you the home-truths), or in your mind afterwards – going over and over the ways in which *it wasn't all your fault*. Perhaps you've felt a combination of the two – both burning resentment and the sense that your confidence has been cut away from under you, the stuffing pulled out....

But perhaps these aren't the most important question: maybe the most important question is what *difference* does it make to your behaviour when someone tells you some unwelcome truths about yourself. Do you admit the justice of at least some of what was said to you, and change your ways, or do you let either resentment, or a feeling of being worthless disabled you from doing anything positive?

Ezra the priest, we're told, read the Law of God to the entire population of Jerusalem and Judah. They had only just finished rebuilding the walls of the city after they had returned from exile in Babylon. They must have felt pleased with themselves for doing that, and yet still things weren't right. Far from the promised land of restoration, peace and prosperity which some of them would have heard about from prophets such as the Later Isaiah, they still struggled in the midst of enemies, they were still vassals under the rule of the Persian Empire, which oppressed them with taxes and levies, and among themselves relations weren't good: in a time of dearth, the rich had lent money to the poor at interest – and when the interest couldn't be paid, they'd made bonded labourers out of the poor people's children. Rapaciousness was rampant.

When the people gathered to hear Ezra read to them from the Law – a reading which the Levites who stood among the crowd were explaining as it went along – the veil was being taken from their eyes; unpalatable truths were coming home to them. The reasons for their plight were being made clear. We're told that the people wept.

But the important question wasn't whether they wept and fell on their faces: it was what was going to come out of it. Put yourself in their place now, and hear Ezra, Nehemiah and the Levites say *'do not mourn or weep...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'* (Nehemiah 8, verses 9 and 10).

Notice three things in this message: it isn't God's will for people to be despairing in a sense of their own unworthiness; it is his desire for us to rejoice; but it's also his will for us to change our ways – in this case, for the rich who had previously taken mercilessly from the poor to share, instead, good things with those who had nothing.

Whether the people all as individuals took to heart these messages is a matter of subsequent history; we, certainly, might find it hard to imagine a whole nation, or even a whole church reacting as one, with all its members changing their ways and views in concert. But the message remains true, no less for that: God wills for us repentance which doesn't disable or take away our self-confidence; he wills for us a repentance and turning that makes a practical difference; and in all this, he wills for us a repentance that is filled with *joy*.

I have asked you to put yourselves in the shoes of the people of Judah as they heard the Law of God, and veil was taken from their eyes about the extent of their failings. Come with me now into the synagogue at

Nazareth for another reading, this time from that very prophet Isaiah who promised restoration, peace and prosperity to God's people. A home-town boy is giving the reading, all grown-up now, and gaining a reputation already in other towns as a focus of wonder. People will have brought all sorts of things in their hearts to this service: curiosity about what sort of person Jesus had become; maybe cynicism or resentment about his growing celebrity; perhaps a genuine openness of heart, to hear what he had to say. But many of them, like the Jews of Jerusalem in Ezra's day, will have brought their own troubles and burdens into the place of worship. Maybe the anxiety of poverty, the troubles of sickness, the limitations and stigma of disability or - like people in every age – the stress of difficult relationships. All of them, shared, too – like the Jews in Ezra's day – the experience of being a people under occupation, taxed beyond their means, with no power to change the government.

With these people's ears, hear Jesus' voice ringing out with Isaiah's prophecy:

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*

And then – remarkably - *'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'* (Luke 4 verses 18,19,21)

What feelings do these words evoke?

And then – if you move on from your thoughts and imaginings about Nazareth long ago, what feelings and reactions do these words evoke for you, in the hopes and fears, anxieties and resolutions, which you carry in your own mind and heart into church here today?....’

I suggest we all reflect on this for a few moments as we hear the words again– but, as we do so, let ‘s also remember that God wills for us a turning towards him which doesn’t diminish our self-confidence, resolution in our lives which really make a difference – and , in and through all this – he wills for us *joy*. .....

*‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’*

*‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’*

.....

*‘The joy of the Lord is your strength’.* (Nehemiah 8.10)