

Nehemiah 8:1-6, 8-10
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:14-21

Notes on the Old Testament Lesson

Note that the people gathered “at the Water Gate”. Despite some pronouncements in the 1970’s, this reference has nothing to do with 20th Century American politics. The Water Gate was the eastern gate on the southern side of the Second Temple’s inner courtyard. On today’s Temple Mount, or Haram al-Sharif, its location is in the southeastern portion of the platform upon which the Dome of the Rock sits.

Nehemiah tells us that the assembly who heard Ezra read the Torah included “both men and women”. The Law, or Torah, is for everyone. It is not limited by class or gender. This marks a significant step in the development of Judaism. Approximately one-third of the individual 613 of the Law’s precepts apply to all of God’s people. The remaining two-thirds apply only to priests. Beginning at this point in Jewish history, the concept grew that all of the Torah should apply to all of the people; that Israel should be a “holy people” and a “nation of priests”.

It is also significant that Ezra told the people to “not mourn or weep”. Rather, they should “eat the fat and drink sweet wine” for “the joy of THE LORD is your strength”. We Christians often have a negative view of the Law, seeing it as a burden or as a restrictive way of living. Judaism has a better understanding; much as we consult an architect to tell us the best way to construct a building or a physician to tell us a healthy way to live, the Law tells us the best way to live in harmony with God and with other people. At the end of the year, Jews celebrate *Simchat Torah*, the “Joy of the Law”. It is a great and happy celebration, thanking God for the gracious gift of the Torah.

Notes on the Epistle Lesson

In this selection, Paul continues his thoughts from last week’s reading; that the church should never be plagued by divisions within its members. In verses 12 – 31, he uses a perfect metaphor: that of the human body. Just as no part of our body can exist without the rest of the whole, no Christian is isolated from other parts of the Christian church. To deny this reality is as foolish as to deny that a hand or an eye can exist without the rest of the body.

Remember that this passage leads into the great “Love Chapter” of 1 Corinthians 13. We normally treat those beautiful words as a separate entity but their true meaning is lost unless we consider them as a part of Paul’s call for Christian unity of heart and spirit.

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

Luke is quick to point out that Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath “as was his custom”. Just as John Wesley never left the Anglican Church, Jesus never renounced his Judaism. While in the Nazareth synagogue, he was given the scroll of Isaiah to read.

Just as liturgical Christian churches usually follow the Lectionary Texts, Jewish synagogues usually read selections from the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings each week. Although we have no direct evidence of when this practice began, it is thought that it was widely in use in the first century, especially in Palestine. The passage from Isaiah (Chapter 61, verses 1 – 2a) that Jesus reads was most likely not chosen by him but was simply the text for that Sabbath.

When Jesus sat down, the “eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon him”. Why? He simply did what was normally done; one of the men in the synagogue would come up, read the passage for the day and return to his seat. The only reason that people would pay special attention is would have been if Jesus sat in some special place and that is what he apparently did.

In every synagogue there was a “seat of Moses”. A rabbi would sit there if and only if he was to speak with special authority. Actually, any time a rabbi would speak with special authority he would sit to speak instead of standing. (Note that Matthew makes a special point that Jesus sat down to begin the Sermon on the Mount.) This practice is continued in the Roman Catholic Church. When the Pope has a pronouncement to make that falls under the doctrine of papal infallibility, it is made *Ex Cathedra*, or “from the chair”. It is from such a position that Jesus tells his hometown that he is the Messiah.