

Year C 2013
Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
(Neh 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10; Ps 19; 1 Cor 12:12-30; Lk 1:1-4; 4:14-21)

The first reading today is from the Book of Nehemiah, which is perhaps little known to most people. The Jewish people had returned from exile in Babylon beginning in 538 B.C. Conditions had been rough, they had taken years to rebuild God's temple, which the Babylonians had destroyed, and there was much in-fighting in the community, religious infidelity and socio-economic inequality (much like before the exile and the many lessons supposedly learnt there!). We humans are always learning to start all over. We are still in the time of the New Year's resolutions, and I bet the ones we have made are very much like the ones we have made for many years, and seem to forget, or we simply have characters and temperaments and habits which are so hard to modify or break. But yet we try, and new things happen, and new people come into our lives and societies, and foster change. And reform. Ezra and Nehemiah were two such individuals in the century following the return from the Babylonian Exile. They rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, something of great significance for the people's sense of restoration and safety. They implemented religious and economic reforms (such as debt-forgiveness) which united the people and gave them a strong identity (the priest-scribe Ezra is considered the founder of Judaism). And many scholars believe that our first reading today is nothing less than the first public reading and interpretation (with explanations) of the finished Torah, the first five books of our Bible. It was such a beautiful moment of national renewal and rebirth that the people wept. Ezra instructed the people not to weep but to make merry, to eat rich foods, for of all days this was not to be a day of fasting or penance. Note that he also said that they must share with those who had nothing prepared.

The reading from Luke can be understood in relation to the first reading. Many years had gone by (over 400!) and the Jewish people in Jesus' day were still expecting deliverance, salvation, that "visit" from God that would restore its confidence, rebuild its walls, so to speak (see "visit" in Lk 1:68, 78; 7:16). Jesus goes to his home town and reads in his synagogue. He reads from Is 61:1-2, which announces a new "Jubilee," a time of forgiveness of all sins (the Jubilee took place on Yom Kippur, Lv 25:9-10) and of all debts, when prisoners and debtors

would be released from their burdens. Jesus, who is God visiting us, gives us rest and refreshment and makes our burdens light and easier to bear (Mt 11:28-29).