

Sermon Sunday 27th January 2013
Eaglehawk Uniting Church
Rev. Ralph Clarke

In the season of Epiphany we hear stories about God being revealed to us. Today's readings point to God being revealed as the scriptures are interpreted. Nehemiah has Ezra read and explain the scriptures to Jews after the re-building of Jerusalem about 135 BC. Luke tells about Jesus reading bits of Isaiah and then telling people he is the one who will fulfil these scriptures. Both are interpreting the scriptures for the people.

Reading the scriptures is important but interpreting what we read is critical. Someone has said we are often good observers but poor interpreters of what we see. An earthquake hits Haiti and some say God doesn't care. One US evangelist said it was God's punishment on the Haitian people. Or, a child gets cancer, and some say it must have been meant to happen, as if God caused this.

There are people who say they understand the scriptures literally and don't interpret them, but often the way they understand the scriptures does God no justice at all and can cripple their own and other people's faith. There are people who say they open the bible & touch the page with eyes averted & where their finger points is God's word for them. That's attempted magic. There are people who fear that interpreting the scriptures introduces a human involvement into the word that is revealed by God. Yet the scriptures had a human involvement from the beginning. The words used are human words, and the meaning of these words change with time, and vary in different parts of the world, and in different cultural and language groups. That is one reason we have new translations of the bible. We need to acknowledge that our human feelings and current experiences of life can affect our understanding of the scriptures.

Today I want to look at what Nehemiah and Ezra had to do. Nehemiah was probably a Jew and came to Jerusalem about 445 BC and 140 years after Persians destroyed the city and took many residents into captivity. 80% of towns had been abandoned in Judah at the time which resulted in massive change. Some of the ones who were taken to Persia had married Persians and were regarded by local Jews as impure. When they came home they were refugees, people with no status, property or rights. Many of the ones who had stayed behind in Jerusalem wanted to preserve some control & may have been local landlords.

The Jews who stayed behind in Jerusalem had apparently made no attempt to rebuild the city, or, to clean up the mess. There were excuses like, "What's the use? If we rebuild it they will only come and knock it down again. It's too costly. We've got too few people, too little energy, so what's the use. The disappointments and excuses of the past were remembered and rehashed each day. How can you be a community of God after a period of decline and neglect when people are feeling demoralised and paralysed by years of inaction and sense of failure? That's also how some church Congregations feel now. Some of the group who stayed behind and who had become leaders in Jerusalem even tried to stop the project. They feared they would lose their status if Nehemiah succeeded in the rebuilding. Nehemiah says those who built the wall often had to have a sword in one hand to ward off trouble makers while they laid bricks with the other hand. It is an inspiring story and Nehemiah became a hero.

After the re-building was done, old animosities and tensions were still there and Nehemiah had to do another building job – building some sense of confidence and unity among the people. Part of the problem was, their understanding of scriptures had become tainted by years of fear, distrust, exile, minority status, failure and hopelessness. People used the scripture to judge and to hurt each other. Some felt the scriptures condemned them for their failures in the past and they wept with shame. It was then that Nehemiah and Ezra told them that the scriptures were not there to make them feel downcast but to encourage them as God's people. They were told to enjoy their life as God's people, "for the joy of the Lord is your strength." That was looking at what the scriptures originally meant instead of hearing them through the ears of their own experiences. Given permission, the people began to change.

In many ways we are also living through a time of unprecedented social change, and a time when our faith is being affected by our experience of living in a fairly secular society. Technology is changing rapidly and changing us. We are dealing with issues like growing population and changes to climate and cultures. Society does not value the church as much as it did in the past. It's not unknown in our churches to feel like a minority in society and to feel exiled from the faith we knew in the past. A sense of fear, failure and hopelessness may weigh upon us as we think about our life.

We can be easily misled by our experiences and we need to listen carefully to what God IS saying in the scriptures and not only to our own interpretations. Perhaps most of all we need to heed what Nehemiah said, that "the joy of the Lord is your strength."