

Third Sunday before Lent
Septuagesima
January 24, 2016
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
116 Theodore St.
Scranton, PA 18508
Scranton, PA
Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10
Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21

Our Old Testament lesson from the Book of Nehemiah tells us about the return of the Jews to Jerusalem after the Babylonian Exile. Recall that in 586 B.C. Jerusalem was taken by the Babylonians and completely destroyed, including, of course, the Temple—Solomon’s Temple. The priests, nobility, and rich merchants among the Jews were taken to what is today Iraq, close to the modern city of Baghdad. After the Persians conquered the Babylonians, Cyrus the King allowed the Jews to return. Later, Artaxerxes allowed the Jews to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and repopulate the city, thus ending the Babylonian Exile. The Jews that had been scattered abroad could return home.

Our lesson today tells us how these Jews reacted upon hearing the words of the Law of Moses. Assembled by Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the governor, they heard the words of the Law, as well as its interpretation, and it caused them to weep. They had not been living according to the Law, so to observe it would be an intrusion into their lives.

At issue was the difficulty of Jewish men taking wives from among their non-Jewish neighbors. To form a people that could complete the reconstruction of the city and resume the sacrifices prescribed by the Law, the Jews would have to distinguish themselves from the pagans around them. Observance of the Law, therefore, turned many of their lives upside down. The new order imposed, however, was a better one for those still living in exile, because a distinctive people could welcome back and defend new arrivals. A people that had intermarried with the enemies of the Jews could not.

This disorder for the sake of forming a better order is a prefiguration of the impact that Jesus has upon those who follow Him. Our personal relationship with Jesus means that He is an intrusion into the lives we’ve been living, disrupting our familiar patterns and laying waste to the plans we’ve made for ourselves. He does this to us because proclaiming release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind is more important than where our own wills might take us. Preaching good news to the poor and setting at liberty those who are oppressed are vocations to which every Christian has been called, but our lives are often turned upside down while He puts us where He wants us.

For example, as I look out at the congregation today and reflect upon the membership of this parish, I see that many, many of you are not from here—Scranton and its environs. My wife and I came here from Bethlehem, but some came from much farther away. We have citizens here from Canada, Jamaica, and Colombia; and Annie, whose daughter we’ll baptize after Mass this morning, comes to us all the way from Benin, in West Africa. How is it that the Lord moved the hearts of so many people from so many different places to make their homes here?

We might attribute our move to Scranton to be due to a job. Or maybe we moved here because this is where our spouse grew up. Perhaps, like me, you were required to come here, because your superior ordered you to. Reflect just a minute or two and we recognize that that superior ordering us to Scranton was Jesus, who

desired to assemble all of us here, in this particular place, for the purpose of proclaiming the Gospel to those now living in darkness. Whether or not this is our native land, if we are at peace it is only because we know this is where Jesus wants us to be to share the gifts He's given for the building up of His Church.

Now it's true that such moves are rather inconvenient, if not downright frightening. When I found out nineteen years ago that I would be moving with my new bride to Scranton, neither of us had ever been here. We were quite comfortable where we were, and even as we made our home here we pined away for the place we used to live. But following Jesus meant that we had to trust that the disorder He had caused in our lives was intended to help restore order in the world around us. We had to trust that we're in Scranton for a reason we couldn't yet understand, but that His love for us would soon reveal it. The words from Nehemiah that we heard this morning are a comfort in this regard. "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." We had no reason to weep, nor does anyone else, for wherever we go we have God with us.

It is true that we could have used our freedom to refuse to come here. This is the temptation that confronted the Jews upon their return from exile. They could use their freedom from captivity in Babylon to do as they pleased, or they could use their new-found freedom to make it possible for others to enjoy the same liberty. If they formed a strong Jewish community, exiles from all over the known world could come home. But if they insisted on using their freedom to contradict God's will, they would be the last generation of Jews to ever be free. Using their freedom in the wrong way would ensure that every generation after them would live in perpetual slavery.

So conforming our wills to God's will, we learn, is what is best for our children. If we want them to be free to follow Jesus wherever He might lead them, then we must be willing to go wherever He is trying to lead us. Our children must see in us examples, people who sublimate their will in order that they might share with others the freedom they now enjoy. We are free to live our lives in service to others in order that those others may experience the joy of a life lived in service. To do as we please not only deprives us of joy, it also means that those to whom we've been sent have occasion to hear the good news properly proclaimed. Moreover, the homeland we're calling people to isn't Jerusalem, it's heaven; so the stakes are much higher for us than those who wept when they heard the Law. To refuse to go where God has called us may well mean the captives Jesus wants to set free remain forever enslaved to sin and death.

Therefore, we must ask the Lord on a regular basis what intrusions he would like to make in our lives. Our life was turned upside down to come here, and maybe this is where we're supposed to stay. Maybe we were born here and never left. But Jesus may have somewhere else in mind for us to be, another place populated by lots of His children who don't know their right hand from their left. Where might that be? We can't know, but we can be certain that if Jesus intrudes again, He will call us to use our freedom to set others free.