

Imagine the situation in our first reading from Nehemiah. The year is 428 BC and the Babylonian Exile is finally over. The Babylonians, who had taken the Jews into exile, have been conquered by the Persian empire. The Persian king, Cyrus, has allowed the Jews to return to Israel and given them back the spoils taken from their temple. Nehemiah is the governor of Israel appointed by Artaxerxes, now king of Persia. He is accredited with the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem. Ezra is a scribe, a scholar of the Law. He is instrumental in the rebuilding of the Temple. The new temple is nowhere near the grandeur of Solomon's temple, because it has been rebuilt with wood instead of stone. Together Ezra and Nehemiah endeavor to revive the chosen people's national and religious life in Israel. Because many of the returning exiles no longer follow the Law of Moses, Ezra undertakes the mission to reignite the faith of Israel by reestablishing adherence to that Law.

Although the Israelites have rebuilt a modest temple, it is primarily used for sacrifices and is not a convenient place for catechesis. This day Ezra begins his mission by preaching to the people in an open place. He does this from a raised platform so the people could see and hear him, much like we do today from our elevated sanctuary. He begins by reading from the Torah, the books of the Law, then he interprets the Scripture so the people can understand what they have heard. When they recognize that they are not keeping God's Commandments, they weep in fear God's punishment. But Ezra helps them see that it is not too late start over, and encourages them to have a feast of rejoicing in the Lord.

This scene from the Old Testament should look familiar – the reading from Scripture, a teaching about the Scripture, followed by a meal. It is a Liturgical service much like our own today. The Jews eventually adopt this form of worship to practice their faith. Because the temple is too far distant to visit on a weekly basis, they gather together in local synagogues to hear the Scriptures read and explained. Synagogue literally means “*a gathering place*”. The temple is a place for sacrifice, but the synagogue is a place to gather on the Sabbath to learn about the faith and to worship God.

Today we call Ezra’s preaching a homily, that is, the breaking open the word of God so all can understand and grow in faith. God’s people had lost their way. They had fallen back into their old habits, intermarrying with the pagans and worshiping false gods. Ezra’s purpose is to draw them back into their covenant with God. The Psalm response today, taken from the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John, helps us understand Ezra’s motivation for doing this: “*Your words, Lord, are Spirit and Life*”. This is why we do it today, we focus on proclaiming the word of God and breaking open that word because they offer us the Spirit and Life of God.

At the beginning of his public ministry in Galilee, Jesus does what Ezra did. Being well educated in the Scriptures he can read and interpret them for the people in a synagogue. Usually this is the role of the Pharisees who manage the synagogues. They are not priests but educated laymen. Since Jesus is considered to be a Rabbi he is also qualified to read and preach on the Scriptures.

However, there is one major difference between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus speaks as one with authority whereas the Pharisees typically cite other authorities in their preaching. This causes friction between Jesus and the Pharisees because his manner of teaching is undermining their teaching authority. Their animosity toward him only grows as Jesus' ministry progresses.

Jesus' choice of Scripture to read and his preaching contribute to this animosity. He chooses one of the few passages from the prophet Isaiah<sup>1</sup> that speaks explicitly of the Messiah or Anointed One. His preaching is a homily like Ezra's in which he breaks open the Scripture from Isaiah. But it is a shocking message because he claims that this passage is fulfilled in himself. Essentially he is saying, I am your Messiah and this is what I'm going to do. I'm going to bring good news to the poor, restore sight to the blind, and liberate those held captive by the devil. But he is also going to *"proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord"*. We may not be familiar with this expression but on that day it is extremely relevant to Jesus' teaching.

A year acceptable to the Lord is a Jubilee year. A Jubilee year is intended to be a time of freeing of slaves and the forgiveness of debts. Jesus is not only saying he is the Messiah foretold by the prophets but he is declaring a time of forgiveness. We know that his actions that fulfill this claim, particularly in forgiving of sins, is what brings him into conflict with not only the Pharisees but the Priests of Israel as well.

As we work our way toward Lent and Holy Week, we will see this conflict build and ultimately give rise to the plot to kill Jesus.

Jesus' teaching this day inaugurates a new era in the history of God's chosen people, the Messianic age. We are blessed, not only with the Hebrew Scriptures, but with the writings of the Apostles in the New Testament. We read from these Scriptures at every Mass, just like Ezra and Jesus did in their day. Like then the homily is an important part of our worship because it is intended to "*break open*" the word of God for us to understand.

In 2007 Pope Benedict XVI wrote in an Apostolic Exhortation that, in part, addresses the importance of the homily: "*The homily is 'part of the liturgical action', and is meant to foster a deeper understanding of the word of God, so that it can bear fruit in the lives of the faithful*"<sup>2</sup>. Like Ezra's homily, homilies today are meant to draw us more deeply into our faith. If we are far from faith, to beckon us back, if we are close, to deepen our understanding of our faith.

Saint Augustine once observed that the "*New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New.*" Jesus' homily today points directly to this concept. He shows us that he is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. The truth about him is indeed hidden in the Hebrew Scriptures. And the writings of the Apostles in the New Testament reveal the deeper meaning of the Old Testament Scriptures regarding him. Today the homily is intended to break open these connections and bring some level of understanding to the surface, a task that is not always straight forward or easy.

We see that the practice of breaking open the word of God has been around since Old Testament times. It is essential to our faith and an integral part of our worship. So please pray for those of us who are tasked with preparing and delivering homilies. Pray that we will be guided by the Holy Spirit to bring a clear and deeper understanding of Holy Scripture to all our people.

1 Isaiah 61:1-2

2 **Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation Sacrament of Charity,  
Sacramentum Caritatis no. 46.**

**The homily**

46. Given the importance of the word of God, the quality of homilies needs to be improved. The homily is "part of the liturgical action" (139), and is meant to foster a deeper understanding of the word of God, so that it can bear fruit in the lives of the faithful. Hence ordained ministers must "prepare the homily carefully, based on an adequate knowledge of Sacred Scripture" (140). Generic and abstract homilies should be avoided. In particular, I ask these ministers to preach in such a way that the homily closely relates the proclamation of the word of God to the sacramental celebration (141) and the life of the community, so that the word of God truly becomes the Church's vital nourishment and support (142). The catechetical and paraenetic aim of the homily should not be forgotten. During the course of the liturgical year it is appropriate to offer the faithful, prudently and on the basis of the three-year lectionary, "thematic" homilies treating the great themes of the Christian faith, on the basis of what has been authoritatively proposed by the Magisterium in the four "pillars" of the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the recent Compendium, namely: the profession of faith, the celebration of the Christian mystery, life in Christ and Christian prayer (143).

**Footnotes**

(139) General Instruction of the Roman Missal, 29; cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium, 7, 33, 52.

(140) Cf. Propositio 19.

(141) Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium, 52.

(142) Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation Dei Verbum, 21.

(143) To this end the Synod has called for the preparation of pastoral aids based on the three-year lectionary, to help connect the proclamation of the readings with the doctrine of the faith; cf. Propositio 19.