

Third Sunday After the Epiphany
Cycle C RCL

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

The date of Ezra's journey to Jerusalem is difficult to establish. Ezra 7:7 tells us that he came in the seventh year of the Persian ruler Artaxerxes, but it is not entirely clear whether this is the seventh year of Artaxerxes I (458 BCE) or Artaxerxes II (397 BCE). Nehemiah, on the other hand, must certainly be placed in the time of Artaxerxes I. The text represents the great rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls under Nehemiah as complete, and the scene of the reading of the Torah is by the newly constructed water gate on the Ophel ridge in Jerusalem. Evidently, Ezra read the words in Hebrew while scores of Levites translated what he read into the vernacular Aramaic for the assembled masses (vs 7.). The expression *torat ha-elohim* (NRSV "law of God") in 8:8 is not a legal term but a wisdom term, meaning something like "instruction." Whatever Ezra read was not a mere list of regulations but the whole of God's instruction for Israel. Some have suggested that what Ezra read was the entire Pentateuch, recently completed in Babylon; but this suggestion is contradicted by the relatively brief time allotted to the reading (8:3). The reading on the first day of Tishri, the seventh month, places the event on what later became the New Year (*Rosh Ha-Shana*).

Psalms 19

This psalm is made up of portions of two different psalms. Psalm 19:1-6 is a fragment of a *hymn of praise* that probably comes from the Temple rituals of Jerusalem before the Exile in 586 BCE while Psalm 19:7-14 is from a *wisdom psalm*. Wisdom psalms were not designed for use in the worship of the Temple but for the instruction of students in the court schools. The "law of the Lord" in 19:7 (*torat adonay*) was not "law" as we might think of it but "instruction" such as a teacher might deliver to a student.

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

The city of Corinth was a byword in the ancient world for drunkenness and debauchery. The Corinthians who turned to Christ did so with a wealth of enthusiasm that seemed to make the old jokes about the city as a place of reveling take on new life in Corinth's Christian community. Although such gifts as speaking in tongues and prophecy made for exciting worship, Paul warned against allowing jealousy and division to be the results of their enthusiastic prayer. The metaphor of the well organized body used in our passage was a commonplace figure for Greco-Roman moralists, helping Paul to explain the proper use of the gifts of the Spirit.

Luke 4:14-21

The author of Luke-Acts found in Mark the story of Jesus' rejection in his home town. (Mark 6:1-6a. See Matthew 13:53-58.) Our author, however, specified Nazareth as this home town even though Capernaum seems to be the setting in Mark and Matthew. The focus in 4:14-21, as often in Luke, is upon Jesus' interpretation of and fulfillment of scripture under the power of the Spirit. Verses 18-19 are a composite of Isaiah 61:1-2 and Isaiah 58:6. The "year of the Lord's favor" is the Jubilee year described in Leviticus 25. Some Palestinian Jews believed that the end of the age would be the "tenth Jubilee," *i. e.* the last of ten 50-year cycles after the return from exile in Babylon. This belief is attested by the Melchizedek document from Cave 11 at Qumran. To such Jews, these verses would be another way of announcing that a new age had begun.