

OCTOBER 3, 2019 Thursday of the 26th Week of Ordinary Time Weekday

Neh 8:1-4a,5-6,7b-12

Ps 19:8-11

Lk 10:1-12

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe, in an epic of faith, important moments of the restoration of the community of the People of God in the ancient land of the fathers after the Babylonian exile. Amidst misfortunes and sufferings, the Lord's plan, already announced in Is 55:12-13, is carried out, even through the decisions of a pagan king, Cyrus of the Achaemenids of Persia; according to both 2 Chr 36:22-23 and Ezr 1:1-4, Cyrus's policy towards the Jewish ethnic-religious minority is the fulfilment of the word of the Lord himself. However, the return of even some of the exiles is not presented as an epic of cheap happiness. The Lord's plan is realized through the various caravans of exiles who return to the land of the fathers, in a "sacred history" that is modelled after the Israelites' return to the Promised Land centuries after their exodus from Egypt (see Neh 8:17). In the book of Nehemiah, the work of restoration of the temple and the city of Jerusalem finds its fulfilment in the reorganization of the community according to the precepts of the Law (see Neh 8:1-10, 40), in the broad participation of the members of the community (see Neh 11:1; 12:26), in the feast of the dedication of "the house of God" (see Neh 12:27-43), and in the people's rededication to the commitments of the covenant (see Neh 13:4-31).

The solemn celebration of the liturgy of the word for the Feast of Booths is a decisive step in the restoration of the worshipping community in the land of the fathers. On the first day of the feast, the liturgy of the word takes place outdoors (see Neh 8:1-2), because the entire land of the fathers is a sacred space, especially the city of Jerusalem, and the Torah is even more significant than the temple and its sacrifices. Ezra, a priest and scribe, must be seen and listened to by all as he proclaims the Law of Moses (see Neh 8:4). Another group of people who are Levites have the task of reading the Law and explaining its meaning to the people (see Neh 8:7-8). Later Jewish traditions interpreted the meaning of the verb "to explain," connected to "reading" the biblical text, as the beginning of the tradition of paraphrasing in Aramaic (the language best known by the exiles returned from Babylon) the biblical text read in Hebrew, that is, as the beginning of commenting (midrash) on the

sacred text in order to seek the Lord through his word. The people respond to the word of the Lord with weeping (see Neh 8:9,11), a sign of true repentance, above all for the awareness of having sinned against the sanctity of the Lord himself, of having despised his love and mercy, according to the prophetic language. By a gift from the Lord, the Word has reached everyone's hearts and moves them on the path of conversion. This liturgical celebration represents much more than the original historical event; it becomes an icon for every generation of believers. Sorrow and weeping are transformed into the joy of the rediscovered word of the Lord (see Neh 8:9); those who have explained that word to people can and must help transform repentance into joy (see Neh 8:11). According to the tradition of Dt 16:13-14, the occasion of the harvest festival – which becomes the Feast of Booths, celebrated in memory of the journey in the desert during the exodus – called for parts of the harvest to be offered to the poor people of the community. It is governor Nehemiah himself who, during the liturgy, calls for the festive banquet to be shared with those who have nothing prepared (see Neh 8:10). Sharing, as a sign of the communion of the feast, is a source of joy and testifies that the Word of the Lord has been understood in one's mind, one's heart, and one's life (see Neh 8:12). The call by Jesus of seventy or seventy-two disciples, who represent each of the twelve tribes of Israel, occurs after his call of the Twelve (see Lk 9:1-6).

Both missions are subsidiary and preparatory to Jesus' own personal journey. Preparation for mission consists in belonging to the community of the Jesus' disciples in the broadest sense of the term, even among non-Jews; the word of God is raised up in the very person of Jesus, as the Law of Moses was before the community at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (see Neh 8:1). In the original community of his disciples, Jesus himself begins to explain the Scriptures as a Gospel (see Lk 24:44-48), making the function of reading and explaining the Scriptures essential in the community of Jesus' disciples (see Lk 24:25-35).

In entrusting the disciples with the mission of proclaiming the kingdom of God, Jesus also speaks of the methods of this mission: the equipment and the praxis (see Lk 10:1-11). He offers practical guidance, partly in keeping with the Judeo-Palestinian culture of the time, such as embracing the "protocol of hospitality" (see Lk 10:4-7; Gen 18: 1-8), but also insists on the urgency and the absolute priority of the mission with respect to the culture of the time (see Lk 10:4). The mission is carried out by a few, not by great numbers (see Lk 10:2), and they are exposed to dangers (see Lk 10:3). They bring a message of peace (see Lk

10:5, 24:36) that will prompt gestures in favour of both evangelizers and those being evangelized (see Lk 10:8-9a) and which has as its object the coming of the “kingdom of God” (Lk 10:9b): the arrival of the Lord Jesus, his journey (see Lk 10:1). As it was then in the Palestinian world, so it always shall be in every part of the world and in all times. Even Jesus’ instructions about how the disciples are to behave when they are refused hospitality in their proclamation of the kingdom of God are guided by the priority of mission (see Lk 10:10-11); the same practice will be adopted by Paul and Barnabas when facing the opposition of the Jewish community (see Acts 13:44-51).

Jesus assures his missionaries that when they are rejected, it is not their concern but the Lord’s (see Lk 10:12). Even the rejection and persecution of Jesus and because of Jesus can become opportunities for missionary disciples to conform themselves to the Passover of their Master, where the message offered, the kingdom proclaimed, his divine-human person and his destiny as Messiah and Saviour, become the only concern: to do the Father’s will for the salvation of the world. The judgment regarding the salvation of the cities to which the saving coming of the Passover of Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of God made present in the person of the Son, is proclaimed remains the concern of God alone. No one can presume condemnation or damnation (see Mt 13:24-43); missionary disciples must burn with the same passion and love for the world, so that all may be saved, going to seek out the men and women of every generation, of every place and city, so that no one should miss the proclamation of the Gospel of salvation.