

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
Year C: Neh 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10; Ps 19; 1Cor 12:12-30; Lk 1:1-4; 4:14-21
January 23, 2022
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In the first reading for this Sunday, we hear the account from the Book of Nehemia of the reading of the Law by the priest Ezra to the people of Jerusalem.

It was the 5th century B.C., about a hundred years after Jerusalem had been conquered by the Persians and the Jewish People had been exiled to Babylon. When Cyrus, the Persian emperor, allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem, they had to rebuild the whole city, which was in complete ruins. They also had to rebuild the Temple, so that they could restore their worship of God. But many of the Israelites had abandoned and forgotten the ways of the Lord. They had adopted pagan practices, and they were no longer familiar with their religious heritage and traditions.

So, Ezra the priest gathered all the people, including the men, women and children, and read aloud to them from the book of the Law of God, reminding them what God had taught them about how to live. The people, we are told, “*listened attentively*” and “*bowed down and prostrated themselves before the Lord, [with] their faces to the ground.*” They even wept as they heard the words of the law, which they had forsaken. And Ezra explained to them about the importance of being faithful to the commands of God, who had saved their ancestors from slavery in Egypt.

It must have been a very dramatic moment, when the people realized how much they had forgotten and how far they had strayed from the teachings of God. Perhaps they even wondered if that was why God had allowed their city to be conquered and destroyed, and themselves sent into exile.

But the important detail of this account from the Old Testament is that the people were *honest* and *contrite* when they heard the Law read to them, and they repented with great sorrow, as the priest Ezra explained the Law to them.

This dramatic scene from the Old Testament challenges each of us in the Church to ask ourselves: What is our own attitude and reaction, when we realize that we have abandoned or neglected a teaching of God? What is our reaction when we realize that we have ignored God’s law and broken it?

As Christians, we know that the fullness of God's law includes the teaching of Christ in the Gospel. In the Gospel for today's Mass, Jesus announces that He is the fulfillment of the ancient prophecies promising redemption (cf. Lk 4:21). This means that what He taught the world is the fullest truth about how God wants us to live, and it includes many challenging teachings. For example, Christ said, "*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you*" (Mt 5:43-44). He also said, "*If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions*" (Mt 6:14-15). We might not always like the teachings of Christ, because they are so challenging, but our faith in Him tells us that His teachings are the deepest truth about how we should live.

So, we should ask ourselves, what is our general attitude about these moral teachings and this divine law that has been entrusted to the Church? Do we welcome and respect the teachings of Christ and the Church as the truth about how we should live? Or, do we sometimes resent these teachings and think that Christ and His Church asks and expects too much from us?

Do we *trust* that the teachings of Christ are the truth about how we are to live? Or, do we sometimes wonder if our own way of living and doing things is better? Do we excuse ourselves from some of the teachings of Christ, and maybe think that they do not apply to us? What is our reaction – what do we say to ourselves, deep down in our souls, – when we realize that we have ignored or disobeyed the teachings of Christ?

The dramatic scene in today's first reading of the Jewish People weeping and prostrating themselves as they heard the Law of God challenges us to examine our own attitude toward the teachings of Christ, which are fullness of God's Law. It challenges us to ask just how religious we are, when it comes to accepting the teachings of God as the truth about our lives.

This should be a spiritual goal for all of us – to welcome and respect the Law of God and the teachings of Christ as the truth about how we are to live, and to admit and respond with sincere sorrow and contrition when we realize that we have failed to obey it. If we do that, then we will become a more honest and faithful people of God, and then we can hope for even greater blessings from God upon us, upon our families, our parish and the whole Church.