

Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10

2**Ezra** Ezra was a priest and a scribe and a member of the Jewish community in Babylon. He was an officer of the Persian court with a title like “Secretary for Jewish Affairs.” He was sent to Jerusalem with silver and gold and a letter of authorization from the Persian king, Artaxerxes, to revive the faith of the people as they returned from exile. It was Persian policy to permit its subject peoples to preserve their own religion and customs which made them less likely to try to overthrow the government.³ **the priest brought the law** This refers to the law of Moses, the first five books of the Bible.² The law contains the early history of the Jewish people and the blessings and curses associated with their covenant with God.²⁰ It is interesting that it was in Babylon that the laws and traditions of Israel were preserved, edited and codified.³ Ezra was instrumental in establishing the Torah as the basic rule of Jewish life. He adjusted the ancient practices of the Law to the needs of the liturgy of the community after it returned from exile.⁴ **before the assembly, which consisted of men, women, and those children old enough to understand.**

3**Standing at one end of the open place that was before the Water Gate,** This was a gate in the wall of the city of Jerusalem. While its exact location is uncertain, it is thought to have been near the Gihon Spring, the chief water-supply of Jerusalem, near the southeast corner of the Temple.⁴ **he read out of the book** This refers to the Pentateuch which is the first five books of the bible.⁴ **from daybreak till midday,** This was six hours a day and it took at least two days if he read the whole Pentateuch.⁴ **in the presence of the men, the women, and those children old enough to understand; and all the people listened attentively to the book of the law.**

4a**Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the occasion.**

5**He opened the scroll so that all the people might see it—for he was standing higher up than any of the people—and, as he opened it, all the people rose.**

6**Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people, their hands raised high, answered, “Amen, amen!” The people joined in the blessing saying, “Truly, truly; I believe; I truly believe. A solemn affirmation of what they hear.”²⁰ Then they bowed down and prostrated themselves before the Lord, their faces to the ground.**

8**Ezra read plainly from the book of the law of God,** Moses read the law to the people when the Covenant was first ratified. Now the people gather to listen to the Law so that Israel may renew the Covenant ratified by Moses.⁵ **interpreting it so that all could understand what was read.** Ezra read in Hebrew and the Levites translated into Aramaic, the common language, and then Ezra explained the meaning as he read.⁴

9**Then Nehemiah,** In Persia, he was a trusted official, the butler of the king, and a devout Jew. He spent 4 months fasting and praying for Yahweh to do something and then in 445 BC he realized that he was “it.” The king sent him to Jerusalem as the new governor. When the walls were rebuilt around the city, he and Ezra called the people together on the Feast of Tabernacles and that is the setting for today’s selection.⁷ **that is, His Excellency, and Ezra the priest-scribe and the Levites who were instructing the people said to all the people: “Today is holy to the Lord your God. Do not be sad, and do not weep”—for all the people were weeping as they heard the words of the law.** They wept because of the gap between the law and their own behavior.² Also a part of the Covenant agreement made with God was that curses would befall Israel if she disobeyed the Law. The curses are listed in chapters 28-29 and they climax with the ultimate curse of foreign oppression and exile and the people recognized their exile as the curse for their disobedience. There was another problem as many of the Jews had taken foreign wives who had not converted to worshipping Yahweh

exclusively. Each case was considered separately and in the end, 110 men had to divorce as a matter of spiritual purity. The rigor of the Law called the Israelites to give up things that they were attached to.⁵

10He said further: “Go, eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks, and allot portions to those who had nothing prepared; for today is holy to our Lord. It was holy because they are renewing the Covenant and they should not be sad because there are also blessings that come with the renewal.⁵ This appears to be a rite of renewal of the covenant. Covenants are sworn by sharing a common meal between the parties to the covenant.²⁰ **Do not be saddened this day for rejoicing in the Lord must be your strength!**” The beatitude catches the spirit of this: “Blessed are those who weep and mourn for one day they shall laugh.”(Mt. 5:4) From now on, the reading of the books of the Law becomes the most important way of meeting God and listening to his word.⁶

1 Corinthians 12:12-30

Last week we heard of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and that since they all have the same origin and are made to operate by the giver, no one recipient is more important than another because all is given for the common good. Today we continue this lesson as Paul compares the Christian community to the human body.²⁰

Brothers and sisters:

12As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. The Church is the body of Christ.²⁰

13For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, Our membership in the body of Christ is the result of baptism when the Spirit of God filled us with divine love. Baptism is the great leveler. Anyone who belongs to the body through baptism shares equal dignity with all the other members.¹ The Spirit is the soul of this mystical body, giving life, growth, and direction to each of its members.⁸ **whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons,** Union with Christ makes ethnic and social distinctions irrelevant in the eyes of God.⁸ **and we were all given to drink of one Spirit.** It is not uncommon for Sacred Scripture to compare the outpouring of the Spirit to drink, indicating that the effects of his presence are to revive the parched soul.

14Now the body is not a single part, but many. Everyone serves a vital and indispensable function in the Body of Christ. As the individual parts of a body perform different functions and yet work together in harmony, so every member of Christ’s Body is assigned an important task for the good of the whole.⁸ Consider that no individual Christian can function effectively by himself.²

15If a foot should say, “Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body,” it does not for this reason belong any less to the body. Apparently some Corinthians disputed the validity of certain gifts which was a presumptuous attitude that called into question God’s wise arrangement of the body and his free distribution of charisms.⁸

16Or if an ear should say, “Because I am not an eye I do not belong to the body,” it does not for this reason belong any less to the body. St. Thomas Aquinas suggests that the eyes of the body serve knowledge and signify the contemplative life of the Church whereas the hands serve movement and signify the active life of the Church. So, too, the head of the body is the clergy in authority over the Church, while the feet are the laity who follow the lead of their head.⁸

17If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

18But as it is, God placed the parts, each one of them, in the body as he intended.

19 If they were all one part, where would the body be?

20 But as it is, there are many parts, yet one body. Christ is no longer physically in this world in his body so if he wants something done within the world, he has to find a person to do it. We are called to be his hands to do his work, his feet to run his errands, and a voice to speak for him.⁹

21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I do not need you," nor again the head to the feet, "I do not need you." The point is that the members need each other.²⁰

22 Indeed, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are all the more necessary. Consider the hidden parts: bones, ligaments, muscle, glands, brain. No member is more important than another. We Need Each Other.

23 and those parts of the body that we consider less honorable we surround with greater honor,

24 and our less presentable parts are treated with greater propriety, whereas our more presentable parts do not need this. Paul refers to our natural sense of modesty for this analogy. The more vulnerable and less presentable parts of the body are all the more protected by clothing. Those people whom society may see as less presentable must be treated with all the more honor.¹ But God has so constructed the body as to give greater honor to a part that is without it,

25 so that there may be no division in the body, but that the parts may have the same concern for one another. We must strive for unity and peace.

26 If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; It is in our suffering that we take on the priestly role proper to every follower of Christ, which we call the "common priesthood." We offer up our own sacrifice of ourselves to cleanse not only our own souls, but the souls of others. We are a royal nation of priests. This is not an empty title. The role of every priest is to offer sacrifice to God for the expiation of sin and in glory of His name.¹² if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy.

27 Now you are Christ's body, and individually parts of it. This connection among members of the Mystical Body of Christ applies not only to those on earth (the Church Militant), but also to those in Heaven (the Church Triumphant) and in Purgatory (the Church Suffering), a connection that is referred to as the Communion of Saints.¹³ In Romans we are encouraged to "pray constantly and attentively for all in the holy company" which we take to mean both those on earth and those in purgatory.

28 Some people God has designated in the church to be, first, apostles; These are missionaries or messengers that are "sent forth" to carry the word to new communities or to start new ministries. Some are sent by church leaders and others are called by God in an unofficial way.¹¹ second, prophets; This is to be sought above all the other gifts. To prophesy is to speak for God. The prophet builds up, encourages and consoles the church¹¹ or as Babsie Bleasdell puts it, God, through the prophetic word, wants to "build us up, lift us up and cheer us up."¹⁰ third, teachers; Teaching is the heart of God's plan of salvation. A teacher "must hold fast to the authentic message, so that he will be able both to encourage men to follow sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it."¹¹ then mighty deeds; then gifts of healing, assistance, administration, and varieties of tongues. Paul ranks the gifts according to their function for the church, not according to any personal privilege these roles bestow on the recipient. His concern is with pastoral function, not with rank.¹

29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work mighty deeds?

30 Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

All Christians are gifted through Baptism. In addition, the Lord commands us to set out hearts on the charisms, the gifts of the Spirit. We are to seek these and in order to seek them, we must know what they are. We do this through Bible study, prayer and use in ministry.¹¹

Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21

The gospel according to St. Luke has been called the loveliest book in the world.¹⁹ Luke was a Syrian from Antioch. He was a physician by profession, a man of culture with perfect Greek. He was not an Apostle but was an early Gentile convert and a disciple of Paul. St. Luke was not an eyewitness to our lord's life. When he refers in his introduction to the sources he has used, he includes "the original eye-witnesses and ministers of the word", among the most outstanding of whom was the Blessed Mother.²⁰

1Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us,

2just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word have handed them down to us, Luke was not an apostle or one of Jesus' disciples because he was not a Jew and he may well be the only Gentile writer in the bible.¹⁷ There is a very ancient tradition that he obtained the details of the Annunciation, birth and infancy of Christ from the Blessed Mother herself. As a result, he is considered a careful historian who has sifted relevant sources to obtain accurate information and he transmits not private opinions of his own, but rather, apostolic traditions.¹⁶

3I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, Each of the gospels is written for a particular audience. Luke wrote for a Gentile audience.³ These verses help us realize that Jesus Christ's message of salvation, the Gospel, was preached before it came to be written down.¹⁵ **most excellent Theophilus,** This may have been a specific person who was a distinguished figure or high-ranking official of the Roman government, or it may represent any and all who are "lovers of God," for that is how the name translates.¹ The person to whom a work was dedicated was often the financial patron who sponsored publication.¹⁸

4so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received. Luke writes his gospel to "Theophilus" to confirm and deepen his understanding of the faith that has already been received through oral instruction.¹⁵

4:14Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, Luke's position is that Jesus' entire ministry was dominated by the Spirit who overshadowed Mary, loosened Zachariah's tongue, inspired Simeon and Anna, inspired John, appeared at Jesus' Baptism, led him into the desert and now leads him to Nazareth. and news of him spread throughout the whole region.

15He taught in their synagogues The synagogue was a small building used for worship and instruction in the Bible. Sabbath services were structured around the reading and exposition of the Law of Moses and the prophets.¹⁶ Since Jewish males were required to travel to the Temple in Jerusalem only three times annually, the synagogue was a complementary site for non-sacrificial worship and education during the remainder of the year. Wherever there were at least ten Jewish families, there had to be a synagogue.² and was praised by all.

16He came to Nazareth, This is Jesus' first visit to his hometown since the opening of his ministry. where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the Sabbath day. He stood up to read and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

17He unrolled the scroll Before books, scriptures were written on parchment or vellum, and rolled on two spindles; to find a place, a spindle was held in either hand, one hand unrolling, the other rolling back up.¹⁸ and found the passage where it was written:

18"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, Jesus applies the personal pronouns to himself. This claim is not easy for his hearers to accept.¹⁴ because he has anointed me This is a reference to the anointing Jesus received at the moment of his Incarnation. This anointing of Jesus

Christ was not an anointing of the body as in the case of the ancient kings, priests and prophets; rather it was entirely spiritual and divine because the fullness of the Godhead dwells in him. Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit HIMSELF, he did not just receive the graces and gifts of the Spirit, like the saints.¹⁵ **to bring glad tidings to the poor.** Luke keynotes the call of the lowly to the Kingdom of the Spirit. Fulton J. Sheen suggests that the “poor” refers to those who had no grace and lacked union with God. The “blind” were those who had not yet seen the Light and the “captives” were those who had not yet purchased true freedom from sin. Now there were to be new spiritual riches, a new spiritual light, a new spiritual liberty, all centering in Christ himself for he was the Evangelist, the Healer, and the Emancipator.¹⁴ Jesus identifies himself with the poor of every kind and makes active love toward them the condition for entering his kingdom according to Mt. 25:31-46. (Jesus knew who he was and understood his role. He chose this passage as a means to begin to reveal his identity.⁵ **He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,** Since many expected the Messiah to liberate Israel from the political domination of the Romans, the townspeople mistakenly thought these passages promised their national independence.¹⁶ Jesus leaves out one of the lines: “to heal the brokenhearted.” Luke reserves the Greek word that means “to heal” for physical cures. Instead he adds a line from an earlier section of Isaiah: “to let the oppressed go free.” **19and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.”** Isaiah’s oracle picks up the language of Lev 25 regarding the jubilee year. As part of Israel’s economic legislation, a jubilee was celebrated every 50 years. It signaled the cancellation of all debts and required property and slaves to be returned to original family owners. Isaiah projects this jubilee celebration into the future when God will come to release Israel from its slavery (idols) and debt (guilt). Jesus follows the spirit of Isaiah when he announces liberation from sin, not from political or economic subjugation. Elsewhere in Luke the word “release” means forgiveness.¹⁶ **20Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him.** **21He said to them, “Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.”** Jesus knew they were expecting a political king who would throw off Roman domination. But he proclaimed redemption from sin, not from military dictatorship. In this way alone they must expect the prophecy of Isaiah to be fulfilled.¹⁴ “Today” is every day and all days from the beginning of the Christian era.¹

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers 2004” by Aelred R. Rosser, (2) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers 1998” by Lawrence E. Mick, (3) “Dictionary of the Bible” by John L. McKenzie, S.J., (4) “Ezra And Nehemiah” by Frederick L. Moriarty, S.J., (5) Commentary Notes of Tim Gray and Sean Innerst, (6) “The Navarre Bible: Chronicles—Maccabees”, (7) “Story Of Stories” by Karen Lee-Thorp, (8) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The First and Second Letters of Saint Paul to the Corinthians,” With Introduction, Commentary & Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (9) “The Bread of Life Catholic Bible Study” by Deacon Ken & Marie Finn, (10) “Refresh Your Life In The Spirit” by Babsie Bleasdel with Henry Libersat, (11) “Seek The Gifts Of The Spirit” by Presentation Ministries, (12) “Bible Basics” by Steve Kellmeyer, (13) “The Navarre Bible: Corinthians”, (14) “Life of Christ” by Fulton J. Sheen, (15) “The Navarre Bible: St Luke,” (16) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of LUKE” With Introduction, commentary & Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (17) “You Can Understand The Bible” by Peter Kreeft, (18) “The Gospel of Luke” by Luke Timothy Johnson (19) “THE GOSPEL OF LUKE” by William Barclay, and (20) St. Charles Borromeo Sunday Scripture Study Online.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.