

A Bible Bullet (aimed at the heart)

Third Sunday of Ordinary Time, Cycle C

Nehemiah 8:2-4, 5-6, 8-10; 1Cor.12:12-30; Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21

This week's reading from the Old Testament Book of Nehemiah deserves some extra attention. We, as Catholics, are familiar with only a handful of Old Testament characters. Although not the most famous OT personality, Ezra takes center stage this week. The story of Ezra the high priest portrays a man of great faith and magnetism. Let's take time to put the scene into historical perspective.

History places the events in the era after the Babylonian Captivity, when Cyrus of Persia, having conquered the Babylonians, set the Israelites free to return to their precious Jerusalem. They had been away for 70 years and returned to a devastated land inhabited by pagans. The ruins of the glorious Temple of Solomon remained only as a pile of debris.

Some of the captives chose not to return to Jerusalem. Ezra was among these. He decided to stay with the nearly 5,000 who chose to remain and he dedicated himself to their spiritual renewal. Ezra worked to provide financial support for those who did go ahead and had so much to rebuild and restore.

Years later, Ezra decided that his work was complete. He wanted to take the remnant people and return to Jerusalem. He took with him gold, silver, the sacred Temple vessels that had been safely carried away at the time of the exile, and most important, the sacred scrolls. His purpose for returning was two-fold: to restore Temple worship (now that the Temple had been rebuilt) and to instruct the people in strict observance of the Law.

In this week's scene, Ezra is fulfilling his purpose by reading from the scripture to the people who had gathered in the square. The people

are so moved by the pure joy of hearing the scriptures, which had been forbidden to them for so long, and by the sincerity of Ezra's delivery, that they remained standing from sunrise until noon, arms raised up in praise, voices shouting "Amen!" Both young and old wept openly. The nation had been united physically under Nehemiah's leadership but it was renewed and revitalized spiritually by Ezra.

Can you identify an event in our church that renewed and revitalized your faith?