

Date: 10/2/19
Occasion: 4th before Lent
Service: Eucharist at St James
Readings: Nehemiah 2:11-18, 1 Peter 2:9-10, John 20:11-18

A CONGREGATION, NOT AN AUDIENCE

It's never really possible to start from scratch. It's long been a given of Christian thinking that only God can do that – and because everyone concerned wanted to ensure that the principle was taken really seriously, they gave it a Latin tag: creation *ex nihilo*, creation out of nothing.

That said, it can sometimes appear that we are indeed starting from scratch – people whose homes have been burned down, recovering from serious illness; those who arrive on foreign shores with nothing but the shirts on their backs, the homeless who all too rarely get the help they need to rebuild their lives and begin to acquire possessions again.

This morning's passage from Nehemiah tells a story of a return and restoration that must have felt like starting from scratch. It isn't, because it is a story told through the eyes of a faith that had never been forgotten in the long years exile. There was something about this mosaic of stories, set down on paper after years, and in the case of the OT, generations, of being told by word of mouth – which, incidentally, as any child will tell you, is the best way for stories to be told – that spoke out of despair to the returning exiles and is central to any meaningful understanding of this story and indeed of the whole of scripture. And by meaningful, I mean one that will encourage and inspire us.

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So Nehemiah tells us of a bedraggled, bewildered, frightened group of people who are inspired by tales of the transformation of another bedraggled group of people into a community of faith. By what they consider to be a miracle, the returning exiles rediscover the Scriptures and the story of the Exodus. So those returning from exile weren't starting from scratch, the story told by Nehemiah makes it clear that they had nothing but the bare essentials: their faith which was a link to their past and the foundation for their shared future.

We're not exactly coming to this morning's worship with the barest essentials this morning. But offering this Eucharist together without some of the customary robes and vestments is intended to be a symbol of that moment of return. Just as Jerusalem would have been somehow familiar, yet very strange, so this morning may feel a bit like that to us. It certainly does to me if I'm honest. [Which is why, albeit unconsciously, I found myself putting on a green tie]

The sense of new beginnings is captured very powerfully in this morning's gospel reading. Mary Magdalene, robbed of her Lord, her teacher, her friend, nevertheless returns to the place she saw him last – the place of dereliction and death. It may all have come to nothing and such is her grief that she is unable to recognise him – until, that is, he speaks her name.

At which point everything changes.

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Tender words of greeting change everything for Mary.

It is a new beginning that makes the best kind of link with their shared past. The vindication and new meaning of her relationship with him is all that matters and that is what gives her the courage to tell others.

Nothing more. Nothing less.

A free gift of love that nevertheless demands everything.

So, with this in mind, what does the first letter of Peter have to tell us?

First, some context. Like the other disciples, like Jesus, Peter was a Jew, accustomed to all that being a Jew meant, in terms of worship and how he lived his life. Remember, it is Peter who has the dream at Joppa, telling him to eat all food, not just that which is kosher. This was a challenge to Peter to look at the very foundations of his faith and therefore his life. If we were looking for a fancy term, we might call it an existential moment, like Paul's on the road to Damascus.

Whatever we call it, the effect of Peter's dream was for him rather like what happened to the people of the Exodus, or the returning exiles Nehemiah tells us about.

It's worth reminding ourselves, that as Moses led the people of Israel into the desert for their long journey to liberty, a good number of them hankered back to the 'good old days' in Egypt! They had been released, but it was many years before they even began to taste liberty.

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All that has sustained, assured and encouraged Peter is being challenged. His dream isn't just a change of menu. It's a change of the whole basis of his life!

So in the passage we have today, we see the fruits of this change for Peter. Whereas previously, the foundation of life had been the Law of Moses as revealed in the Torah, the Scriptures, now Jesus is the chief corner stone, the beating heart of faith and life.

This leads Peter to make an astonishing claim. *Reread 1 Peter 2.9 – 10.*

Chosen race: this is no accident, and everyone is called. Incidentally, this passage brings into question many modern notions of racial identity which seek to exclude rather than include: God unites us, not pigmentation or language.

Royal priesthood: we have got ourselves into the unfortunate habit of thinking about priesthood as the exclusive preserve of certain women and men. And it is true that the Church calls out people into the ordained ministry to carry out certain tasks that are considered to need particular formation and preparation. But Peter reminds us that by virtue of our being joined to Christ – through baptism and the life of faith – we ALL share in the priesthood of Jesus, the one true priest: we are ALL called to offer ourselves, our God-given gifts to the glory of God and the sharing of the good news of God's saving justice in Christ.

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As Peter tells us we are a holy nation, God's own people,

In order that [we] may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvellous light.

In calling us God is not starting from scratch. God takes all that we have been, all that we are and invites us to offer ourselves in love and thanksgiving so that God's holy name may be honoured and the world transformed.

So, sisters and brothers, I stand before you today without the usual vestments, not because I do not value them. By no means. Those vestments represent a continuity of worship with those early Christians for whom such clothes would have been every day wear. They also represent, to me, at least, that when I stand before you I do not do so because of any merits of my own, but because the Church in the person of the bishop who ordained me and the bishop who has licensed me, has seen that by authorising me to perform certain tasks on your behalf, there is an odds on chance – which I hope is borne out by your experience – that I will do more good than harm.

But me saying that should not blind us to the truth that in a very, very important sense, we are all priests and as such I hope you will take from this act of worship

The understanding that St Peter reminds us that we are called to be a congregation not an audience;

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That knowledge God's love knows no boundaries: it will use, but it will not be bound by our preferences in worship, or in any other way;

The reassurance that our stories matter. As I stand here Sunday by Sunday, I never cease to be overwhelmed by the many and varied stories that come together as we meet in Christ's name: stories of grace, of hope and longing, of successes, disappointments and occasional failures.

We ARE chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. Our task, expressed in our welcome, our witness, our prayers and worship, is to understand, as Peter learned, that we have no exclusive rights, that if we really believe in the love of God – and how can we, as followers of Jesus, not believe this?

If we really believe in the love of God, we have no choice but to rejoice in the privilege of worship, and seek any and every opportunity to share this joy in all that we do, all that say, all that we are.

AMEN.