

Third Sunday of the Year January 24, 2016

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

God's love for humanity is outstanding as we see it in creation and redemption. He also invites every person to respond to his personal love. From the earliest of times God has called human persons to be with him for he is the creator who has made every human person in his own image and likeness and desires to have constant contact with him. He invites all human persons to a personal relationship with him and when they do wrong and go astray; he invites them to a spirit of repentance to make them live a life worthy of him. Repentance means to turn around, and go in the opposite direction, change ones way of thinking, change their values, change the mind and heart, change their desires, and more importantly change the direction of life. It means that there is an invitation for a total conversion and a complete transformation in the person. However there comes a time in the life of every child of God to respond to his invitation to follow Him closely and participate in His mission. This might require a change in their present career into a service dedicated for God. There are several paths one can choose to follow Jesus, be it in the teaching, medical, legal profession or retailing business, there is one basic decision to make: whether to pursue it solely as a means of livelihood and personal enhancement or to use it as a means of service to God and humanity.

Today's First Reading taken from the Book of Nehemiah tells of the crucial role of the Law of God in the Israel community. Ezra and Nehemiah were given the special task by God to rebuild the community. They were also given the task of rebuilding the Temple of God. They knew of the importance placed in those days on knowing and obeying the Law of Moses. Anyone who had reached the age of reason and could hear with understanding was required to be present and to listen to the reading of the law. They were called upon to live the law in total fidelity. But Ezra first starts rebuilding their hearts. The Prophet dramatises the crucial role of the word of God. He stands on a platform and reads it from daybreak to noon. People listen to the word of God, understand the law in their heart and receive it with fervour. They raise their hands and respond with a double Amen. They lie down on the ground and offer total submission to the Lord. There is hope for the people whose strength is the Lord and the prophets urge them to rejoice. They also shed tears perhaps reflecting the infidelity of the earlier generations. So there is hope for the people of God whose strength is the Lord. The prophets call on the people to rejoice.

Today's Second Reading from the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians revealed to us how important it is for the members of the Body of Christ to be united. Each member has been called to serve the Lord. He sees the multiplicity of Christians as living members of one Body. Each member interacts in a constant giving and receiving. And each member gets the same respect. In fact, it is the "weakest" and "least honourable" parts which receive greater attention. For it is in mutual giving and receiving as one Body that we enable each other to experience the enrichment, the vision and the freedom which Jesus wishes us to have. The problem with our Christian living is that it is so individualistic. They try to manage things on their own. God has called each person for a different function. But the unity of the church is in its source in the one Spirit. Though there are many members as in a human body, the body of the church has many members but it is one body. At the same time, each member of the human body is distinct and has a different role to play, so also the body of Christ performs various functions. Every member needs the other and the one with superior function does not become superior. All members are to care for and honour one another. Paul also adds that God has a special care for lowly members.

Today, we begin reading from the Gospel written by Saint Luke, the companion of Saint Paul. Saint Luke the evangelist was a doctor and he endeavoured to make his Gospel an abundant and sure source for all who believe in Christ and who love God. Luke is the only Gospel that begins with a prologue. It sets forth the motivation for composing the story of Jesus. Luke accepts that he is not the first one to write but he wants to be accurate, based on the earliest of traditions and clearly organised. He writes to Theophilus who may have been a recent convert or a benefactor of the author. He wishes to give him that certain account of Jesus to the certainty of the teaching already received and convince him of his faith. Theophilus means lover of God or the beloved of God and actually it means each one of us. Luke clearly acknowledges that he himself never saw Jesus. His gospel was written at least 50 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Yet he wants to assure his friend that what he writes is accurate and is based on the experiences of people who did know Jesus personally. We find in this narrative the essential facts regarding faith in which the Christians are instructed.

From the Prologue today we move directly to the event of the return of Jesus to Nazareth after his successful Galilean ministry. Galilee is the northern province of Israel to which Jesus belonged. And he went back to Nazareth "where he had been brought up". By the time he returns home but he does not go alone; he is already empowered by the Holy Spirit. Luke very deliberately has Jesus start his work here. His public life will be a single, direct journey from Nazareth to Jerusalem,

unlike the other Gospel accounts. And it is in Jerusalem, the city of peace, where Jesus will suffer and die. It is here that he will rise to life and become our Lord and Saviour. And it is from here too that his disciples will go forth to every corner of the world with the Good News. The setting for the story is the Sabbath day service in the Synagogue. There were no priests in the synagogue, which was simply a prayer hall. The priests were in the Temple, the only place where sacrifice was held. Every male Jew had a right to read the Scriptures in the synagogue and to speak to the assembly. Jesus is called upon to read the lesson and he chooses the text from Prophet Isaiah, about the restoration of Zion. What is stressed in the scripture reading is the description of the coming of the messianic age. It looks to the future with great hope and longing. The Prophet is commissioned to proclaim the good news to the poor and other related activities to be performed by the messiah. These are the extra ordinary tasks specially set aside for the redeemer of the universe.

After reading the text Jesus simply declares that the passage is fulfilled in their hearing. People must have been really shocked and amazed when Jesus announced: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." By applying this text to himself Jesus places himself on the same prophetic line as Elijah and Elisha. He declares himself to have been anointed by God to carry out and fulfil God's plan for Israel. In other words Jesus is telling them that the Messianic age is here and he is the one anointed by God to bring the fulfilment. Many were expecting the messiah to be a mighty king, a powerful leader who would restore the political kingdom of Israel from the Roman domination. But they find the young man so well known to them now making that claim. At the same time they should have been happy when a person not much of a stranger tells them that he would save them. He tells them that God is close at hand. He tells them that this God is a healer and will never be indifferent to them. He will love them, free them and protect them. Jesus tells the audience that he is the healer and they have to listen to him to be like him to continue his sacred work. A single thing holds their attention and ours as well: the person of Jesus.

When Jesus teaches in the synagogues, people listen, certainly. But they do not understand everything, and perhaps they understand nothing at all. However, they were struck by a word, a sentence, a well-placed allusion and they remembered it and they continued to think about it... That is when the Spirit goes into action and enlightens them, at first only a little, and later on more powerfully and persuasively, in order for them to believe in Jesus, the Saviour of the world. The Spirit of God, the Spirit of Love, rests upon Christ: by revealing the Father to us, by preaching his Good News to us, Jesus also gives us his Spirit, his Love, so that

we might live, thanks to God, in Truth. This Good News still comes to us today, under the appearance of a little bread: in the Eucharist, Jesus again preaches to us his Good News, in order that the Spirit might live in our hearts to teach us of the Truth, who is God.

In this Gospel passage we heard Jesus proclaiming that the year of the Lord's favour as it was written in the Scripture. By this Jesus meant that the long awaited messianic jubilee had finally arrived. The promised messianic salvation had ultimately come. Jesus affirmed that He was the long awaited Messiah and they ought to rejoice in it. In His proclamation, Jesus said that He had been anointed to bring good news to the poor, He had been sent to release the captives, for the recovery of sight of the blind and to let the oppressed go free. Literally taken with a worldly approach, these words imply that Jesus had come to bring abundance to those who were poor, to free the slaves and the prisoners, to heal the blind and to stop all worldly oppression. But this was not what Jesus meant. Embracing a spiritual approach, it becomes clear that the proclamation of the Lord Jesus was to announce the arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth. The Kingdom of God was the good news that Jesus was proclaiming. For the arrival of the Kingdom of God is to be fulfilled meant the arrival of the promised Messiah. It indicated that those who were spiritually blind would be enlightened; now being able to see the way, the truth and the life. It meant that those who were captives or slaves of sin would be free and liberated in the kingdom. The kingdom will grant them new life.

With this text from Prophet Isaiah Jesus declares himself to have been chosen by God to carry out and fulfil God's plan for Israel. In other words Jesus is saying that the messianic age is here and he is the one set apart by God to bring it to fulfilment. The power and the Spirit of God had descended on him at Jordan. The Father had declared him as his chosen one and that all must listen to him. His divine sonship was still hidden and the people could see him as a known human person. The content of the text is very precise and will be the driving force behind all that Jesus says and does in his mission. Jesus is the fulfilment of all the prophetic promises that have gone before him. They are addressed directly to the materially poor, those in prison, the physically blind, the oppressed and exploited of the world. The message for them is one of hope, of healing and of liberation. This will come about not by some miracle but by the transformation of those who, aligning themselves with Jesus, can put an end to these things.

With those materially poor, there are those who are emotionally underprivileged, those who are lonely or rejected, those who are crushed by their need to be surrounded by material plenty... all are poor, really poor. Again are those held in

captivity, especially those who are unjustly in prison but also those who, guilty of some crime, need conversion and reconciliation, there are many, many who are far from free. Very few people indeed are truly free and many actually fear true freedom and the responsibility that goes with it. Jesus speaks of blindness and healing. Physical blindness is far less disabling than the blindness that comes from prejudice, ignorance, jealousy and other emotional blocks. Jesus aims to reach out to everyone and provide them with a new identity and dignity. That is his mission role as the one filled with the Spirit. In the first reading we heard of the proclamation of the law. And Jesus too does it in the Gospel. The Law was essential for dignity, human rights and freedom but there is a new ingredient in what Jesus gives - compassion. As we continue the celebration of the Holy Mass, let us pray for one another, that through our Christian Unity, the Body of Christ may come to its fullness so the Lord God may be glorified in all things and live the mission of Christ to proclaim the good news.

The rejection of Jesus by the townsfolk was indeed shocking. He was known person to them coming from their own place and they could not accept him. But this is only the beginning of several other rejections which ultimately led him to his cross and death on Calvary. John tells us that he came to his own and his own did not accept him. The reason indeed was their misunderstanding of their concept of a messiah and of the salvation. They looked for a political kingdom and not a spiritual kingdom. Jesus proclaims this kingdom to us too and we too accept him. As we celebrate this year of faith we ask God to send this kingdom into our lives and hearts

Not long ago I heard a story about a young man and an old preacher. The young man had lost his job and didn't know which way to turn. So he went to see the old preacher. Pacing about the preacher's study, the young man ranted about his problem. Finally he clenched his fist and shouted, "I've begged God to say something to help me. Tell me, Preacher, why doesn't God answer?" The old preacher, who sat across the room, spoke something in reply - something so hushed it was indistinguishable. The young man stepped across the room. "What did you say?" he asked. The preacher repeated himself, but again in a tone as soft as a whisper. So the young man moved closer until he was leaning on the preacher's chair. "Sorry," he said. "I still didn't hear you." With their heads bent together, the old preacher spoke once more. "God sometimes whispers," he said, "so we will move closer to hear Him." This time the young man heard and he understood. We all want God's voice to thunder through the air with the answer to our problem. But God's is the still, small voice... the gentle whisper.

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