

3RD SUNDAY OF YEAR C January 27, 2013

Nehemiah 8 (excerpts)
1 Cor. 12, 12-14,27
Luke 1, 1-4; 4, 14-21

Matthew, Mark, Luke ... A, B, C. We are in Year C in the liturgical cycle. That means we will hear excerpts from St. Luke's gospel during the season of ordinary time. **Ordinary** time? Don't we live in the fullness of time when every minute of every day of the year is grace-filled? The Son of God has taken on our humanity, suffered, died, and been raised to be our Savior. He has revealed all we need to know of God the Father's loving plan for fullness of life in a new creation. Can time really be ordinary now?

The beginning of St. Luke's gospel is uniquely autobiographical, giving his reasons for writing a reliable account of the events based on eye-witnesses' testimony. In other seasons we hear his version of Jesus' infancy, the baptism and the temptation in the desert. Today we hear St. Luke's account of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

The gospel and the first reading from the Book of Nehemiah can be seen as a diptych, describing somewhat similar events that occurred about 600 years apart. The Jewish exiles back home from Babylon are gathered at the Watergate in the ruined walls of Jerusalem listening to the Ezra the priest read to them the word of God from daybreak to noon. The townspeople of Nazareth are assembled in the synagogue listening to a native son reading the assigned lesson from the prophet Isaiah for that Sabbath. Ezra reads the book of the Law of Moses, interpreting its meaning as he goes along. Jesus reads a passage from the last chapters of Isaiah, and claims that what he read is fulfilled in their hearing. Those hearing the Law of Moses with its severe sanctions for not keeping it, not being obedient, react with sadness and weeping. Ezra the priest and the governor Nehemiah encourage the people to feast and rejoice in the Lord, because they assure them, "Today is holy to the Lord." They encourage them to rejoice in the Lord who will give them strength. Those in the synagogue, hearing Jesus' claim that the prophetic Good News is fulfilled in him, are pleased with his interpretation and teaching.

As we will hear next Sunday the townspeople's positive response was short-lived. They know that Jesus is the son of Joseph the carpenter, their neighbor. They know his mother, his brothers and sisters. He and his claims are too much for them. Soon they drive him out of town and try to throw him over a cliff.

How sad that Good News is dismissed, even opposed by some hearers? How is it that we, mere mortals, resist the Creator's plan for our temporal and eternal well-being, which is truly good news? God has given us guidelines for a good life: the commandments, the law of love. In spite of all that revelation and aid, we know that sinfulness is a reality and that we experience the cumulative effects of it individually and collectively in spiritual blindness and weak wills.

St. Paul describes our sad state as an internal war between the law of the flesh and the law of the spirit. But there is hope. "There is no condemnation now for those who are in Christ Jesus!" In the morning office the scripture reading was from Paul's letter to the Romans, the beginning of chapter 8. His words are so appropriate to our reflections I want to quote them at some length. He wrote:
"The law of the spirit, the spirit of life in Christ Jesus, has freed you from the law of sin and death. The law was powerless because of its weakening by the flesh. Then God sent his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh as a sin offering, thereby condemning sin in the flesh, so that the just demands of the law might be fulfilled in us who live... according to the spirit.you are not in the flesh, you are in the spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you."

Two thousand years later here we are assembled on the Sabbath to hear the word of God and offer a suitable sacrifice to our creator and redeemer. So let's make the diptych a triptych. Like the Jews in the Nazareth synagogue, our eyes are fixed on Jesus and the word fulfilled. At his baptism Jesus was anointed with the Spirit of God. He the holy one, the sinless one, empowered the waters of baptism to wash away our sins. Paul reminded the Corinthian believers - and us along with them - that at baptism we were anointed with the same Spirit, becoming members of Christ's body.

As members of Jesus' mystical body, is it really too bold for each of us to say, Today the Spirit of the Lord is upon me and has anointed me? We should rejoice to be able to make that claim, while sobered by remembering the mission that goes with it. Like Jesus' disciples we are told to go spread the good news, to set captives free, heal the sick, feed the hungry and clothe the naked. There are many members but one body; there are many gifts but one Spirit. Let us grow in sharing the material and spiritual resources we have been given to promote the good of others, to offer some relieve for the terrible effects of sin in the world.

In the opening prayer we asked God to direct our actions to abound in good works in the name of Jesus and for God's honor. We can only do that by letting Jesus' love for us warm and soften our hearts, by letting the Spirit of Jesus enlighten our minds and strengthen our wills.

As we return to the Eucharistic table, let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. By taking to heart his word, by uniting ourselves with his acceptable sacrifice, by receiving his sacramental body and blood, we are emboldened for the mission he has given us. **Today is holy to the Lord. Rejoicing in God will be your strength.** So to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit let there be given honor, glory, praise and obedience always, now and forever. AMEN