

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10

The book of Nehemiah is one of the historical books of the Bible and continues to chronicle the history of the Jewish people. The books of Kings and Chronicles leave Jerusalem and the temple a heap of ruins, and the people of Judah exiles and captives in Babylon (587 B.C.). But, the exiles never forgot Zion and the glories of Solomon's temple. In 539 B.C. (48 years later) Cyrus II, King of Persia, conquered Babylon. Flavius Josephus, the 1st century A.D. historian, recounts how the Jews showed Cyrus the text of the prophecy of Isaiah where Cyrus' name appears (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1):

“This was known to Cyrus by his reading the book which Isaiah left behind him of his prophesies; for this prophet said that God has spoken thus to him in a secret vision: – ‘My will is, that Cyrus, whom I have appointed to be king over many and great nations, send back my people to their own land, and build my temple.’ This was foretold by Isaiah one hundred and forty years before the temple was demolished. Accordingly, when Cyrus read this, and admired the divine power, an earnest desire and ambition seized upon him to fulfill what was to written; so he called for the most eminent Jews that were in Babylon, and said to them, that he gave them leave to go back to their own country, and to rebuild their city Jerusalem, and the temple of God, for that he would be their assistant, and that he would write the rulers and governors that were in the neighborhood of their country of Judea, that they should contribute to them gold and silver for the building of the temple, and, beside that, beasts for their sacrifices.” [*Antiquities of the Jews* 11,1,2(5-7)]

Cyrus was so impressed that in 538 B.C. he issued an edict permitting those who wished to do so to return to Jerusalem.

Although the Jews returned immediately after the king's decree and started rebuilding the Temple, the building works were soon stopped due to fierce opposition from the Samaritans. What particularly rankled the Samaritans was that they were not allowed to join in the rebuilding. The work was not restarted until 520 B.C., under Darius I, and it was completed four years later thanks to the intervention of Zerubbabel and the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah. However, although the temple was finished, 40 years passed without the walls of Jerusalem being rebuilt – again due to Samaritan opposition.

Nehemiah presided from 445 until 433 B.C. over the restoration of the community and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. As Ezra was responsible for the religious regeneration and reform of the community after the exile, so Nehemiah was for organizing its security and establishing a sound administration; despite continuing opposition from

the inhabitants of the surrounding towns.

Our canonical books of Ezra and Nehemiah are combined by the Septuagint into a single book which has the title Esdras B. Preceding it is Esdras A (the apocryphal 1 Esdras in modern translations).

Today's reading tells of Ezra's reading of the Torah (the Law of Moses) to the people.

² []Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly,

The law is the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. It contains the early history of the Jewish people and the blessings and curses associated with their covenant with God.

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, he read out of the book from daybreak till midday, 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 Ezra 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!"

Truly, truly; I believe; I truly believe. A solemn affirmation of what they hear. It is a covenant oath.

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, interpreting it so that all could understand what was read. ⁹ Then (Nehemiah, 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 are weeping because they know how impossible it is to keep all the commands of the Law and how horrible are the curses for disobeying the covenant.

¹⁰ He 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.

Share in a common meal. 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.

Do not be saddened this day, for rejoicing in the LORD must be your strength!"

Following the covenant reaps blessings.

2nd Reading - 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.

12 As 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.

“Paul is pointing out that just as the body has many members, some of which are more important than others, so it is with the Church also. But every member is necessary and useful.” [Saint Theodoret of Cyr (ca. A.D. 453), *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 246]

13 For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body,

Baptism incorporates the individual into the risen, glorified body of Christ. It places an indelible mark on the soul just as circumcision made a visible mark under the Old Covenant (Colossians 2:11-12).

whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit.

Baptism gives an infusion of the Holy Spirit.

“There is one work because there is one mystery, there is one baptism because there was one death for the world. There is a unity of outlook which cannot be separated.” [Saint Ambrose of Milan (A.D. 381). *The Holy Spirit* 1,3,45]

14 Now the body is not a single part, but many.

This is the key phrase to this whole reading – Just as the human body needs different members (verses 14-20), so the Church needs a diversity of spiritual gifts, and each one makes a specific contribution to the common good; the health of the body.

15 If 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. 16 Or 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. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the

whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But 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.

“If everyone in the Church were equal, there would be no body, because a body is governed according to the difference in the functions of its members. The diversity in the members of the body unites for the purpose of ensuring that the body fulfills its potential.” [The Ambrosiaster (between A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles*]

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 perspective has changed slightly – the point is that the members need each other.

²² Indeed, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are all the more necessary, ²³ and those parts of the body that we consider less honorable we surround with greater honor, and our less presentable parts are treated with greater propriety, ²⁴ whereas our more presentable parts do not need this.

In terms of clothing, the genitals receive more attention than the ear or nose. The instinct of modesty reveals the divine plan to ensure that the eyes (for example) should not command all consideration.

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. ²⁶ If (one) part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy. ²⁷ Now you are Christ’s body, and individually parts of it.

Paul applies verse 14 (“the body is not one member, it is many”) to the spiritual gifts.

²⁸ Some people God has designated in the church to be, first, apostles; second, prophets; third, teachers; then, mighty deeds; then, gifts of healing, assistance, administration, and varieties of tongues. 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?

The first three recipients of the gifts are set off from the others by being numbered and personalized. A hierarchy is shown because the Church is, by divine will, a hierarchical institution. These three constitute the fundamental threefold ministry of the word by which the Church is founded and built up:

- Apostles - Bishops to oversee
- Prophets - To monitor the covenant. Prophecy is defined by its effect on the community.

- Teachers - Revelation in the sense of a new insight into the mystery of salvation is actualized in pastoral guidance and instruction.

Hierarchy means holy government and sacred order. It is not a human order – Our Lord established in the Church an order which should not degenerate into tyranny but the authority is a call to serve all members of the body for the common good (see also Romans 12:5-6).

“Paul has placed the apostles at the head of the church. They may be identified with bishops, as Peter said of Judas: ‘Let another take his bishopric’ (Acts 1:20, RSV). There are two types of prophets, those who predict the future and those who interpret the Scriptures. The apostles are also prophets, because the top rank has all the others subordinated to it. Even a wicked man like Caiaphas uttered prophecies on the strength of his rank, not for any virtues he might have possessed (John 11:49-51). Teachers are those who instructed boys in the synagogue, a practice which has come down to us as well.” [The Ambrosiaster (between A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles*]

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

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 (about A.D. 40) and a disciple of Paul. He accompanied St. Paul on his second journey (A.D. 49-53) from Troas to Philippi, remaining there for some years, until he again joined Paul toward the end of his third journey (53-58). He stayed with Paul when he was imprisoned in Caesarea; he was with him on his adventurous trip from Caesarea to Rome and during his first Roman captivity.

St. Luke was not an eyewitness to our Lord’s life. Therefore, 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. It must have been she who provided most of the information Luke gives in the first chapters of his Gospel.

Luke is the only Gospel writer to give his book a preface or prologue (1:1-4). This prologue is really a summary of what the Gospel contains and helps us to realize that Jesus’ message of salvation, the Gospel, was preached before it came to be written down.

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

Luke’s purpose is not merely to record history, he narrates events that are interpreted as having been brought to fulfillment by God for human salvation.

2 just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word

have handed them down to us,

Seeing isn't sufficient for Saint Luke, these sources have not only seen, they have acted upon their faith and now proclaim the Word.

³ I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus,

The name Theophilus means "beloved of God". Who this person is is unknown. Luke wrote this gospel and Acts to him – the only times he is mentioned in the Bible (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). Theophilus could be a generic "all Christians".

⁴ so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received.

Confirm the oral teaching.

4:14 Jesus returned to Galilee

This is the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Just prior to this He was baptized (Luke 3:21-22) and was tempted in the desert (Luke 4:1-13).

in the power of the Spirit,

The Holy Spirit descended on Him at His baptism (Luke 3:22) and He was full of and led by the Holy Spirit when He went into the desert (Luke 4:1). His encounter with the devil has not diminished the power of the Holy Spirit.

and news of him spread throughout the whole region. ¹⁵ He taught

Jesus was a teacher. He had the authority to address people about God and God's plan.

in their synagogues

He was teaching openly in the Jewish place of worship and instruction. Jesus stands in continuity with God's promises of old.

and was praised by all. ¹⁶ He came to Nazareth, where he had grown up,

Jesus starts His public ministry where His hearers think that they know Him and His origins.

and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the Sabbath day.

It seems that the Sabbath synagogue service in the first century consisted of the singing of a psalm, the recitation of the *Shema* and the 18 benedictions, a reading from the Torah, a

reading from the Prophets, a sermon on the meaning of the readings, a blessing by the president, and the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24-27.

He stood up to read ¹⁷ and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written:

Here we are dealing with Luke's theology of promise and fulfillment. The passage was Isaiah 61:1-2. This is where the prophet announces the coming of a messiah who will free the people from all their afflictions.

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,

The blessings God will send the people through the Messiah. "The poor" refers not so much to a social condition as to a very religious attitude of indigence and humility toward God; those who instead of relying on their possessions and merits, trust in God's goodness and mercy. Likewise, "release" is seen to be a spiritual sense - freedom from the blindness and oppression of sin. This passage is also in line with Jesus' special concern for those most in need.

"Similarly, the Church encompasses with all her love all those who are afflicted by human misery and she recognizes in those who are poor and who suffer the image of her poor and suffering Founder. She does all in her power to receive their need and in them she strives to serve Christ" (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 8)

¹⁹ and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord."

Leviticus 25:10. Symbolizes the era of redemption and liberation which the Messiah would usher in.

²⁰ Rolling 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. ²¹ He said to them, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

The fulfillment of the promise is Luke's theme. The waiting is over, the Messiah has arrived.