

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

January 27, 2013

If I were to ask you, “What do you listen to?” how would you answer? Perhaps you would answer in terms of radio programming or perhaps in terms of technology. Would it occur to you to say, “I listen to the Word of God?” Today’s readings reveal the important role the Scriptures played in the lives of God’s people and in the life of God’s Son, Jesus.

Two of today’s readings remind us that we are the spiritual descendants of a people for whom the Scriptures were *the* authoritative voice in life, providing ongoing guidance, solace, and challenge. Consider today’s reading from the book of Nehemiah. People who had been forcibly removed from their homeland have been allowed to return to Jerusalem. One of the first things that happened was their priest gathering them together and reading the Word of God to them. Ezra, the priest, gathered the men, women, and those children who could understand, and he read to them from the Torah, the book of the Law of the Lord.

We are told that Ezra read to them from daybreak until noon, about six hours, and the people stood, listening, with tears streaming down their faces, tears of sorrow because they had not been faithful to the Word of God. But Ezra says to them, “Do not be sad, and do not weep.” Ezra recognizes this as a day of great joy. He tells the people to eat rich food and drink sweet drinks. Why? Because “Today is holy to our Lord.” God’s people gathered around the Word, listening to the Word. It is a Word in which they found their identity and purpose.

And we continue to do this when we come together to worship God. We listen to God’s Word, written down long ago but still a living Word for us now. And just as Ezra interpreted the Word of God for his people, someone stands here and interprets it for us and our lives. The Word of God remains a light in the darkness and a lamp to guide our feet.

In the Gospel we see Jesus turning to the Word. He has come back home after being baptized in the Jordan. At that event the Spirit came upon him. Luke tells us, "Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit." The native son has finally come to his hometown, Nazareth. The stories of him teaching wisely and working wonders have preceded him. And what does he do first? He goes to the Sabbath service at the synagogue.

This is an important moment. Here Jesus proclaims who he is, both to the home folk and to all who hear his voice. He takes up the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and turns to chapter 61. He opens it and reads the passage where the prophet speaks of one whom God will anoint in the power of the Spirit. This anointed one will do three things. First, he will preach: he will bring Good News to the poor, proclaim liberty to captives, and announce a year of favor from the Lord. Second, he will liberate: he will let the oppressed go free. And, third, he will give sight to the blind.

This text articulates the threefold ministry of Jesus: the ministry of preaching Good News of the coming of God's kingdom; the ministry of social justice, bringing freedom to those held captive by forces of evil; and the ministry of bringing sight to the blind, that is, a ministry of compassion. This ministry is marked by gentleness, forgiveness, nonviolence. This ministry of compassion keeps the preaching ministry from becoming pie in the sky, and the social justice ministry from slipping into anger and violence.

This threefold mission of Jesus remains the mission of those who follow Jesus. At Christ Our Hope Church, we continue to bring the Good News of God's love to others, to work for justice and reconciliation in our world, and to reach out with compassion to all. We are the Body of Christ, as Paul reminds us, stewardship parishioners each with different gifts. But all gifts are given for the common good: of the church, of our society, of our world.

What does it mean to be a people of the Book? What does it mean to be formed by the Word of God? Look to Jesus, formed by the words of the prophet Isaiah. He came to hear God's calling through the words of the prophet, and to engage in a ministry of preaching, liberating, and embodying God's compassion.

The Word of God calls us to know who we are, to be attentive about who God is, who Jesus is, so we can know who we are. Then God calls us to act and let this Word bear fruit in our lives.

Paul A. Magnano

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