

Third Sunday after Epiphany, Year C

Psalm 19. The heavens are telling the glory of God.
Nehemiah 8, extracts.
1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a.
Luke 4: 14-30.

Three long readings today, but don't be put off. Let's see if we can get the gist of the stories.

Nehemiah: Ezra was reading the law of Moses (bits of the first five books of the bible) to exiles recently returned to Jerusalem. They had, in honour of their return, recently strengthened their city walls to make them feel a bit more secure. However, they were not behaving well, and earlier in the story we read that they were exploiting their fellow kinsmen, they were charging interest on loans, and generally being bullies. The response of these naughty people to hearing Ezra laying down the law was penitence—'the people wept when they heard the words of the law.' Ezra then suggested that instead of wailing, they had to learn not just to be sorry, but to live better. At that moment, this meant worshipping God with *joy*, and ensuring that the poor whom they had previously exploited had food and wine with which to join the party they had planned for themselves.

Now the Gospel. Jesus turns up at his childhood home, a bit like a returning hero maybe. He is well received. His ministry, he tells his hearers, will fulfill a vision of liberation described by Isaiah 'to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.' And they are delighted – until he points out to them that this message will affect them. And the message is this: his own kinsmen, the people of Nazareth, will *not* be first in the queue to benefit from his message. Luke's Gospel always emphasizes that Jesus' message is for outsiders and not just members of the club. Jesus pointedly and provocatively tells his kinsmen that nonJews and people considered unclean will be at least as near the front of the queue as the people of Nazareth. The Gospel is for everyone. Needless to say, the Nazareth people don't like this. They were 'filled with rage', and 'drove him out'. A bit like a Rector who points out unpalatable truths to people who don't want to hear them. What really riled his former neighbours was Jesus pointing out their idea that God always favoured the Jewish people was just not true: Elisha and Elijah had acted outside religious boundaries to care for people they despised.

In the epistle we have the well known passage in which Paul points out that all of us with our different skills and gifts make up the body of Christ, and that just as different parts of the human body have different functions, and the body would be incomplete without any one of them, so each one of us is part of the whole body of Christ—and damage to any part of the body is damage to the whole of the body. We are all in this together. Congregations consist of people who might not always get along, or even might not like each other. But we all have a part to play in building up the church, seeing the church prosper and building up the kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven. There is a common purpose to our faith. We use the Book of Common Prayer, common meaning shared by all, as in common land.

In the OT lesson, Nehemiah is talking about releasing the oppressed. In the Gospel, Jesus is talking about releasing the oppressed. Release is a theme here. Bringing good news gives a sense of relief. Captives are released. The blind are released from the limitations of their shortsightedness. The oppressed are released. Release, liberation, deliverance. Moving from restriction to freedom. This is a very common theme in Hebrew scripture. And in the Epistle, we can, I hope, begin to see that when we accept that we are part of the whole, we are released from the self-obsession that narrows our view of the world, that narrows our outlook and that restricts our vision of the world. Nehemiah's message is about restoring good relations in that community. The epistle is about tolerating the different parts that make up the whole. The gospel is about getting people to see that 'we are all in this together.' We move from me, me, me to us, us, us. Our faith becomes a matter of public witness, not just something we do for an hour or less on a Sunday. At the end of the HC service, we are dismissed with: Go in peace to love and serve the Lord – that is, be public about what you do and how you live.

Our society is suffering at the moment – listen to the news, read the papers, because people believe that individual freedom is more important than anything else. But today's readings emphasize again that we are all in this together. What affects someone affects us all. What hurts someone hurts us all, and your joy is my joy too. All this is about recognizing the *dignity of difference*, and building community. Starting with ourselves and each other. What can we do to encourage each other? Growing in faith, growing in humanity. Growing in humility.

Jesus came

- to heal the blind - those who cannot see that there are people there willing to lend a hand;
- to free the oppressed - those in chains of bitterness, anger
- to release prisoners - prisoners of their own fears, obsession, pride, vanity.

As a Christian community, it is our task to build one another up, offer what we can to those who have no wealth (i.e. those oppressed etc) and to proclaim to the world that we are all part of Christ's body.

So, brothers and sisters, let's be glad of each other. Be glad we have different skills and gifts, and be glad that together we make up the body of Christ.