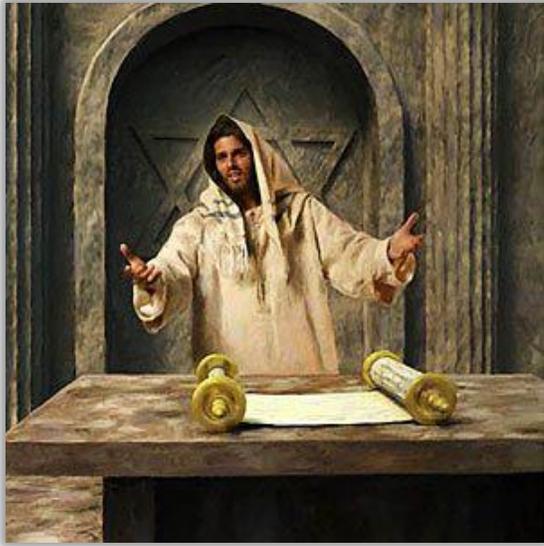


Homily for January 23, 2022 – Third Sunday in Ordinary Time



Sometimes I wonder, and maybe you do too, whether all God's great feats of power, all God's great interventions into human history, that all of these marvellous deeds took place only in Biblical times and have, somehow, dried up for us here and now. If that is so, then maybe God's past involvement in human affairs is solely for the purpose of giving us inspiration in the present. Or, more demoralizing still, somehow people of the past were more open, more deserving, more holy, more pleasing to God than we are, making it easier for God to work wonders in their midst and not so easy now.

The readings given to us today tell me that none of this is true. These readings today, can be condensed into Jesus' words where he said, ***"My Father is still working, and so am I"*** (Jn. 5:17). Apparently, they don't take the summer off, nor has there ever been a labour strike halting construction of God's Kingdom here in the present. When Jesus said, "My Father is still working and so am I," these words were part of Jesus' defense when he healed a crippled man on the Sabbath. In an attempt to discredit Jesus, the Pharisees claimed Jesus was a fraud, as God certainly would not approve any work, including miracles, on the Sabbath—the day of holy rest. Sabbath or no Sabbath, the year 20 or the year 2022, pandemic or no pandemic, financial security or the brink of poverty, health or sickness—God is always at work. And if God is at work so is Jesus. This indeed is good news.

The first reading, from the book of Nehemiah, took place some 500 years before the birth of Jesus. At that time, the Jewish people were coming through a terrible period in their history. They spent 50 years isolated from their home country of Judah as captives in Babylon. (They too might have been thinking, "God, you worked miracles in the past, how about intervening in a powerful way right now!"). After their freedom was secured and they were allowed to return to their own country, they did so in two big waves. The first wave happened almost immediately. In that initial wave, the returnees, without delay, set about to rebuild the holy Temple that the Babylonians had previously destroyed. The second wave of returnees, happened a few decades later, and was lead by Ezra, the priest and scribe, we heard about in today's first reading. It says he assembled the people and read God's Word to them. Their ears were attentive, they fully understood, and when Ezra was done reading, the people answer with a resounding, "Amen, Amen!" (which means, "Let it be so"). Even though they were cheerful, they still felt guilt for their past sins, for it says, ***"All the people wept when they heard the words of the Law."*** It's almost like they sensed the sins of their parents and grandparents, the ones who turned their back on God and thus incurred the wrath of God's punishment—50 years of

exile in Babylon. Ezra responds by saying, ***“Go your way, and share your food and drink with those who have nothing. Do not grieve your past sins, but rejoice—right here and now—in the Lord who is your strength.”***

Ezra is encouraging his fellow Jews not to focus on their past sins but to focus, instead, on what God is doing in their midst right here and now. Ezra wasn't concerned with rebuilding the Temple. He was devoted to a bigger and more difficult task at hand, the task of rebuilding people's faith in God. The true God cared little about temples and even less about holding people to their past sins. The true God wanted people to get on with the task of feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty. That is how you build Temple, and I think that is how you build Church.

The gospel story of Jesus proclaiming the scriptures in the synagogue also tells us of God's wondrous deeds here and now. What Jesus is reading from is the scroll on which the words of the Prophet Isaiah were written. They are words from the past that Jesus is bringing alive in the present. Isaiah lived at that same time when the Jews were sent into exile. Jesus is reading the word of Isaiah, words of hope spoken to people who didn't need to be reminded of their sins but who needed to be reminded that God loved them and would never abandon them. It was about good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free.

After Jesus is done proclaiming this, he says to the worshippers, ***“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*** In other words, God did set people free in Isaiah's time and God is still setting people free today. God's deeds of power are not relegated to the past, but are active today!

I love the insights about this text that come from the late Fr. Henri Nouwen. He reminds us that God's word has power in the present. In the very moment that God speaks, something creative emerges in the world. In the Book of Genesis, God said, “Let there be light,” and immediately there was light. The Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) was written in Hebrew for the Hebrew-speaking people. In Hebrew, “speaking” and “creating” are the same word. Similarly, when Jesus speaks, his words are immediately being fulfilled. “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your listening.” “Suddenly,” as Henri Nouwen says, “it becomes clear that the afflicted, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed are not people somewhere outside of the synagogue who, someday, will be liberated; they are the people who are listening. And it is in the listening that God becomes present and heals.”

Perhaps that is why the Church, at the Second Vatican Council in the '60s said, “Christ is fully present is the Word proclaimed.” So, while a pandemic prevents you from receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, you, nonetheless, fully receive Christ in his word proclaimed.

Henri Nouwen goes on to write: “This text is being fulfilled today even as you are listening to it.” Often we think about the Word as an exhortation to go out and change our lives. But the power of the Word lies, not in how we apply it to our lives after we have heard it, but in its transforming power that does its divine work as we listen.” He goes on to say, “When someone says to me, “I love you,” or “I hate you,” I am not just receiving useful information. These words do something in me. They make my blood move, my heart beat, by breathing speed up. They make me feel and think differently.”

One last insight; this one I get from Fr. Richard Rohr. I never thought of this before. Jesus, is clearly quoting the prophet Isaiah, when he reads aloud about bringing good news to the poor, releasing captives, etc. Isaiah ends with, “**...to proclaim a year of the Lord’s favour and a day of vengeance from our God**” (Is. 61:2). While Jesus quotes Isaiah, as Fr. Rohr points out, he ends with, “...to proclaim a year of the Lord’s favour.” There is no mention of God’s vengeance when Jesus quotes Isaiah’s words.

Jesus is more like Ezra, encouraging the people to leave their faults in the past and move forward with a clean slate. There is no guilt in Jesus’ words, nor in the words of Ezra, only an invitation to do today the good we are all capable of. After all, we all belong to the same body, the Body of Christ, and each of us has something good to contribute, big or small. When we do that, deeds of power are no longer relegated to Biblical times, but are the power of God active today.

Fr. Phil