

3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time

January 24, 2010



First Reading

Nehemiah 8:2-6, 8-10

For years, many of the Jewish people had been forced into exile in Babylon (6th cent. BCE). Those who were left behind were shattered by the destruction of their city, Jerusalem, their temple and the economic abuse of them by the rich and powerful. After a time of suffering, God touches the heart of the Persian emperor to use his power for the good. He sends his cup-bearer, Nehemiah to rebuild the city and temple. At a ceremony to mark the completion of the project, Ezra, a priest and scribe of the community, reads aloud from the Book of the Torah ‘in the presence of the men and women and children old enough to understand’ (v.3), many of them returned exiles. It is not surprising that they shed tears!

How moving to hear again in their most sacred space the wisdom of the parent, God, whom they never doubted, even in their darkest days, would light the path for them into the future.

One contemporary author, Cynthia Bourgeault, reflects on the grace of tears: ‘I have often suspected that the most profound product in the world is tears. I don’t mean to be morbid. Rather, I mean that tears express that vulnerability in which we can endure having our heart broken and go right on loving. In tears flow a sweetness not of our own making, which has been known in our tradition as Divine Mercy’. Those who ‘listened attentively’ to Ezra that day, knew only too well that the ‘jagged and hard-edge earth plane is the realm in which this mercy is most deeply, excruciatingly, and beautifully released’ (*The Wisdom Jesus*, 2008, 100).

Psalm 18 (19)

‘The law of the Lord is perfect’ (v. 8). Luke provides an insight into the Hebrew understanding of perfection, which was also that of Jesus’ understanding. The perfect way is the way of compassion: ‘Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate’. (6:36; cf. Mt 5:48)

The *Torah* weaves narratives of God's involvement with the Hebrew people in every aspect of their lives with repeated calls to them to safe-guard religious, moral and social observances that support and sustain all aspects of life. In hearing God's word read and re-read, they are wrapped again and again in God's blanket of support and compassion for them, a community under pressure to assimilate with secularity and traditions linked to the gods of human making. Attentive listening to the word of God in the liturgy continues to be a means of support in living as people of God and of being freshly wrapped in God's compassion so that we may not bend under pressures similar to those of our spiritual ancestors but rather become bearers of God's love to others.



Second Reading

1 Corinthians 12:12-30

Paul is responding to a situation of competitiveness: The members of the community at Corinth are competing with one another for the higher spiritual gifts as if life in Christ was an athletic competition within the community. Paul is rejecting any type of dualism which leads people to see the world in terms of 'either' / 'or' rather than 'both' / 'and'. Such binary vision categorizes the community into 'free' / 'slaves', 'gifted' / 'ungifted', 'Jews' / 'Greeks' and so forth. By means of his use of the metaphor of the body, Paul is indicating that in Christ, there is no place for defining oneself ultimately by such distinctions. He indicates rather that Christ calls us to 'see with the eye of singleness'. This kind of (in)sight is provided by the heart, not the eye. Jesus calls for this kind of vision when he gives the following instruction: 'Love your neighbor as yourself' (Lk.10:27). He is not asking each one to 'Love your neighbor *as much as* you love yourself'. That interpretation maintains the binary view – 'neighbor' / 'me', as if we are two distinct entities. What Jesus calls each one to is this: 'Love your neighbor *as* yourself - as a continuation of your very own being'. (Ibid, 31) From this unitary perspective, the *community* grows into one entity, one body, reflecting the God's Oneness.

Gospel

Luke 1:1-4; 4:12-21

The elements of the ritual reflected in the first reading today from Nehemiah developed into a model for the synagogue service of the Jews, and is reflected in our own Liturgy of the Word in the Eucharist. There is the bringing of the Torah scroll/sacred scripture, the mounting of the platform that contains the desk for reading, the opening of the scroll/book, the blessing, and the communal *Amen*. When Ezra reads from the scroll the people weep tears of joy and gladness at the accounts of God's care of and fidelity to them. Imagine the tears of joy of the poor, the captives, the blind, and the downtrodden when Jesus does indeed fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah and reverses their lots during his own lifetime (1st cent. CE).

Recall how the sinful woman, upon being forgiven, stood behind Jesus at his feet weeping and began to bathe his feet with her tears (cf. Lk.7:36-50). The mission that Jesus outlined for himself became Nano Nagle's mission and is our mission today. Imagine the tears of joy and gratitude of the poor whose lives were touched by Nano Nagle and her companions in Cork (18th cent.). Recall a story of someone(s) tears of joy or gratitude because of what the Spirit of God did through you or your community in the name of Jesus. Recall a story of your own tears of joy when a difficult situation was reversed or turned out ultimately to be a blessing in disguise.

Sr. Anne O'Leary, PBVM (San Antonio, TX)