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January 27, 2019

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When was the last time you were in church and heard a truly breathtaking homily, saw people moved to tears by the challenge they heard, or witnessed a prophetic challenge to pious decorum? Have we so tamed, timed and formalized our liturgies that we forget why people once listened to Scripture and preaching for as long as Fidel Castro used to talk, or that weekly worship gatherings were often a setting for serious controversy? Perhaps it is convenient to ignore the fact that much of Jesus' most provocative behavior happened in the synagogue or around the Temple area.

When Jesus opened the Scriptures in the synagogue at Nazareth, he set the tempestuous course for his entire ministry. It all started quite normally. Jesus had been away from home. Some people must have heard that he had gone to John's baptismal site. Did they know that he had then been in the wilderness for 40 days? Luke tells us that he returned "in the power of the Spirit." We might wonder if that showed on him. Did he resemble Moses whose face glowed after encountering God on the mountain?

People surely knew that Jesus had been up to something because his reputation preceded him. Once at home, he went to the synagogue where Joseph had taught him to pray. Someone decided that the returning son should be the one to read from the prophet. So Jesus opened the scroll and reintroduced himself to his neighbors.

It began normally enough as he read passages they had heard scores of times before. Jesus proclaimed the prophet's comforting promises. People remembered how the Spirit had been with Isaiah. They mulled over the ancient dreams about good news to the poor, freedom from slavery, the recovery of sight. Some of the elders may have smiled contentedly, thinking, "No matter how far he wandered, he is our son. He treasures the tradition."

Then Jesus rolled up the scroll. People were watching, awaiting his commentary. He looked at them and, in a sense, said, "This is happening right here, right now."

His statement blew like a frigid wind chilling their quiet contentment and nostalgia. He was taking the Scriptures out of the context of the past and acting as if they were referring to their own times! Quick thinkers got it: He was speaking as if he were the anointed one. He was acting as if he believed it.

Today's Gospel selection ends here. Next week, we will pick up the story and hear how his scandalized and jealous neighbors reacted. But today's Liturgy of the Word stops at this point, leaving us in the same position as Jesus' astounded audience.

This passage from Luke is aimed straight at today's church, reminding us that Jesus' words are not comfort from the past but a program for today. Pope Francis insisted on that in *Evangelii Gaudium* when he said: "Reading the Scriptures also makes it clear that ... the Gospel is about the kingdom of God. ... To the extent that [God] reigns within us, the life of society will be a setting for universal fraternity, justice, peace, and dignity" (#180). Francis' words are simply a variation on Jesus' announcement that the Scriptures are fulfilled today in our midst.

St. Paul takes this so seriously that he calls the Christian community the body of Christ. He says that is who we are and what we are to become. Paul insists that every member of Christ's body has been called and gifted by the Spirit. This business of being church is not an option. Rather, it is our vocation as surely as Jesus' mission was his call from the Spirit.

In the same paragraph cited above, Francis went on to tell us that "Both Christian preaching and life ... are meant to have an impact on society." That means that if we live as Christians, we will disturb the same sectors of society that Jesus did. If our worship is truly Christian, it will move us to make a difference.

Jesus announced just what that difference should look like. It centers on being good news for the poor, which means people who are poor economically, socially, chronologically, educationally, geographically or in any other way. Wherever there is a real presence of the body of Christ, life will be different for the poor, beginning with the fact that they will know they are loved and respected and that they are invited to our tables.

One day in Nazareth, Jesus reintroduced himself to his neighbors by telling them that his vocation was to bring God's promises to fruition. Today, if we want to be true to his Spirit, we must do the same. That is a breathtaking challenge, but we don't have an option.

### **NEHEMIAH 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10**

Although the Liturgy of the Word rarely includes selections from the Book of Nehemiah, this wonderful, holy man is well worth knowing. He was the cup bearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia, and around 450 B.C.E. he obtained the king's permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He organized the people to restore their city and then called them all together to renew their commitment to God. The elaborate celebration of that recommitment is the subject of today's first reading.

Nehemiah describes the scene of the celebration with careful detail. As on national holiday, everyone came together — including children who had reached the age of reason. This was a formal assembly of people who had collaborated with Nehemiah, who had braved enemy attacks and labored by hand to rebuild the city of God. The principal celebrant was the Ezra, the scribe. People prepared a wooden stage where he would be seen, and the scroll could be enthroned.

With rituals that rival a papal Mass and lasted much longer, Ezra ceremoniously opened the scroll of the law for everyone to see. We can almost hear the crowd's spontaneous intake of breath as they waited to hear the proclamation. They rose as one for Ezra to bless them. They responded with a resounding "Amen, amen!" and prostrated themselves before the word of the Lord.

For six hours, Ezra read and explained the law to them. The celebration, as emotional as it was long, was the sort of event that unites people and lives on in their memory.

The people who heard this proclamation remembered the ruin of their city. Now, renewed by their labor and worship, the reading touched them to the point of tears. God was again smiling on them. They had a future.

After the reading, Ezra called them out of their remorse. They had once been unfaithful, but that was in the past. Now was a time to rejoice in the God who brought them back together, who sent Nehemiah, and who renewed the covenant with them in spite of their sin. They were to treat the day as a holy day, a day of celebration, a day when wealthy and poor would enjoy rich food and good wine.

Ezra's final instruction explained the meaning of the entire celebration. "Rejoicing in the Lord must be your strength." That meant that recognition of what God was doing for them and gratitude were the attitudes that would maintain them as God's people. Concentration on sorrow for their sin carried the danger of locking them in a self-centered orientation toward the past. Rejoicing in their God would turn their hearts beyond themselves and remind them that although they were incapable of saving themselves, they were in God's hands. And that was all they needed.

### **PSALM 19:8, 9, 10, 15**

This psalm is a wonderful response to the first reading. We can pray this in union with the people who listened to Ezra. When the psalm sings of the law, it is actually referring to the whole Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, the narratives of Israel's early history and covenant relationship with God. When we sing of the goodness of the Law, we are giving thanks for the covenant. When we sing, "Your words, O Lord, are Spirit and life," we rejoice in the ways that God's word enhances and orients our life.

Our first two stanzas sing of the law as a kind of wisdom that enlarges our soul. Appreciation of the law is described as a clear path to peace and justice. The third stanza praises the fear of the Lord, a phrase referring to the awe we feel when we recognize God's presence in nature, in others, in the Scriptures, or in prayer.

The fourth stanza reflects the psalmist's sense of reciprocity in relationship with God. As we sing of the joy we receive from the word of God, we also pray that God will be pleased with our song.

### **1 CORINTHIANS 12:20-30**

The Corinthians were a prickly group of Christians, particularly prone to disunion based on competition and comparison. In response to concrete problems among them, Paul's advice to the Corinthians was very practical. What must have exasperated Paul more than anything else was their spirit of rivalry in regard to spiritual gifts. Some of the Corinthians' thinking could be compared to a prosperity gospel that claims that wealth is a sign of God's blessing, and the greater the wealth, the greater one's status before God. Different members of the community had received different charismatic gifts and some of them assumed that their particular gift demonstrated their superiority.

Such thinking was anathema to Paul. Braggadocio about spiritual gifts reveals profound ignorance about the meaning of grace. This problem was worse than the exaggerated self-concept of some or even the discord they could cause. In Paul's perspective, the people who flaunted their gifts or discriminated against others were doing serious harm to the very body of Christ and demonstrating that they did not understand the meaning and effects of their faith.

At the beginning of this letter, Paul had dressed them down for their pretentiousness, reminding them that they had never been the most enviable people according to human standards. His summary statement about their supposed wisdom was, "Whoever boasts, should boast in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:31). That idea from the end of Chapter 1 underpins what he says about gifts in Chapter 12.

As Paul hammered home the idea that the community was one body and each an essential part of the whole, his mystical theology sustained and deepened everything he was attempting to get across to the community. The core idea in Paul's argument was, "We were all baptized into one body ... we were all given to drink of one Spirit." While there are numerous reasons to work for unity in a group, Paul saw unity as a product of grace before it had anything to do with human effort.

In Paul's understanding, the Christian community is unlike any other group. We are not born into it like a nation or ethnicity, nor do we choose it like one chooses a guild or club. The Christian community is called into being by the Spirit of God to be the body of Christ in the world. In that sense, no one belongs to her or himself; we are all part of one another by reason of grace and vocation.

Additionally, while called as one, our uniqueness or diversity is not erased, but rather enhanced. The Spirit bestows the gifts needed by the whole community. We

all share equally in whatever honor or shame there might be.

If that was a difficult concept for the Corinthians to grasp and live by, it is worse for people whose thinking has been shaped by modernity and the cult of the individual. Understanding Paul's spirituality of the body of Christ requires us to be aware of the grace of being called into the immensity of God's love. We get glimpses of what it might mean when Paul says such things as "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). Paul lived with a vivid awareness of his participation in Christ, and that was what he wanted his community to grasp as well.

### **LUKE 1:1-4; 4:14-21**

Today's Gospel selection begins with Luke's literary dedication of the book and then skips to Jesus' announcement of his mission in his hometown. In between these two passages, Luke mentioned Jesus' baptism, the descent of the Spirit, and Jesus' time of temptation in the desert.

Luke's dedication gives us a good amount of information about his purpose and the context for his writing. He tells us that many have narrated the events of Jesus' mission — although not many of those writings survived and even fewer have been recognized as presenting authentic portraits of Jesus. Luke admits that various narratives depended on eyewitnesses and says that he wants to recapitulate everything in an orderly way so that his reader can grasp the solid truth of it all. Luke addressed all of this to someone called Theophilus, a name which means "friend of God."

After hearing what Luke took as his mission, we hear his description of Jesus' proclamation of his own mission and vocation.

Luke's Gospel begins with great emphasis on the Holy Spirit. In the beginning, the angel told Mary that the Holy Spirit would come upon her. Simeon recognized Jesus in the Temple by the power of the Spirit. When Jesus was baptized, the Spirit descended upon him and then led him to the wilderness. Now, when Jesus returns to Galilee, Luke says that he did so under the power of the Spirit.

Luke tells us that Jesus announced his mission among laypeople in the synagogue, not in the Temple, the religious center where the priests presided. The synagogue had de-clericalized Israel's prayer by allowing worship to happen anywhere that people gathered to hear the Scriptures and pray.

Luke's narrative of Jesus' self-presentation in his hometown synagogue brims over with symbolism. When the scroll was delivered into his hands, Jesus opened the Scriptures and read from the prophet Isaiah. (He actually quoted a combination of selections from Isaiah 61:1, 58:6 and 61:2.) Jesus chose passages that described his own vocation, beginning with the fact that the Spirit of God was upon him. As we saw last week in Cana, Jesus did not see his vocation as that of a fiery prophet; when he claimed the vocation to announce a year of favor, he deliberately omitted a phrase about God's vindication.

The phrases Jesus read were well known. But then he did the unexpected. While all eyes were on him, instead of beginning to comment on the passage, instead of telling his people that they should all hope for the day of the Lord, Jesus sat down and said, "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

The time for commentaries and theologizing had come to an end. Jesus was no scribe, priest or even a prophet. While he had been in the desert, he had rejected the devil's proposals for how to live as God's son and servant. In the synagogue, he reintroduced himself to his people. He was anointed to teach by doing. From that moment on, he would reveal God's will and favor by actually being glad tidings, by freeing people, by giving sight and establishing an atmosphere pleasing to God.

Today's readings combine to demand our immediate attention and action. They remind us of the immense power of God's living word. Today's liturgy tells us that if we are Christians, being the body of Christ and good news to the poor is not an option but the sine qua non of our life.

## **Planning: Third Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By Lawrence Mick

The scene described in today's first reading might raise several questions for our assemblies. The first might be what would possess the Israelites to stand outside "from daybreak till midday" listening to Ezra read aloud from the Bible. Can you imagine getting your assembly to listen that long to anything?

The second question might be why hearing God's law should lead to joy. Notice that the people weep when they hear it, presumably because they had not been living

according to God's will, but Ezra and Nehemiah tell them not to be sad "for rejoicing in the Lord must be your strength!"

A third question that might arise, perhaps, is why the proclamation of God's word in our own assemblies seldom affects people as deeply as it did that day so long ago.

All three questions are worth reflection by preachers and planners, but especially the last two. Hoping that people would stand for hours listening to even the most spellbinding speaker seems a vain exercise.

Finding joy in God's law, however, should be a bit easier. Most people think of the Ten Commandments as the law of God, though Ezra was obviously proclaiming a lot more than that. But we have been taught by Jesus that the greatest commandment is the dual commandment to love God and our neighbor. That law should bring us joy, for love is the reason we were made. Though we may shy away from the demands of love at times, we know from our own experience that loving others is the source of the deepest joy in our lives.

Pondering the efficacy of our own proclamation of the word during the liturgy might lead planners to consider how well the lectors are carrying out their ministry. Are they adequately trained to proclaim in a way that makes the word come alive in our midst? Are some getting sloppy and not preparing until they show up at church on Sunday? Have lectors been taught how to use the readings and their preparation as a way to grow in their spiritual life?

Parish leaders might also consider the tools lectors are given. Is the sound system as good as it can be? Would better microphones make it easier for the assembly to hear the proclamation clearly? Are there dead spots in the worship space that need to be remedied by better speaker placement? Have you ever asked people sitting in different parts of the church how well they can hear? Do those with hearing loss need special assistance?

Pray today that we will hear God's word clearly and embrace it in our lives. Pray for lectors and preachers and all who teach us God's word. Pray for the grace to fulfill the great commandment and find joy in sharing God's love with others.



# Prayers: Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Joan DeMerchant

## Introduction

Israel was sustained throughout countless struggles by God's word revealed in the law. We Christians do not identify ourselves by the same criterion, but by a larger sense of law disclosed by Jesus, the living revelation of God. His ministry proclaimed a new law rooted in love that is lived out on behalf of others. A liberating law, it requires a searing focus and discipline by us as individuals and as a community. Providentially, the same Spirit that animated Jesus animates us.

## Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, your baptism led you to proclaim a new law, rooted in love: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, your ministry demonstrated the liberating aspect of this law: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us, as a baptized community, to share this good news: Lord, have mercy.

## Prayer of the Faithful

**Presider** Let us pray now for our concerns and for the concerns of the whole world.

**Minister** For Pope Francis and the whole church — especially in this challenging time. May we be a shining witness to God's law of love for all people, we pray:

- For those places in the world where civil law is used as a weapon to impede justice, limit freedom or inflict unnecessary pain, we pray:
- For those whose lives are complicated by church law, and for those who hide behind the law or are unwilling to consider necessary changes to the law, we pray:
- For the local and national organizations and their efforts to liberate anyone falsely accused and punished; and for the will to resist condemning others by our attitudes, speech or actions, we pray:
- For the courage to promote God's love for the poor and oppressed in families, neighborhoods and workplaces, especially when this message is unwelcome,

we pray:

- For this community, that we may reflect the unity we are called to as members of Christ's body, despite our disagreements or conflicts, we pray:

**Presider** God, whose law is love, sometimes we find ourselves ambivalent about law. Sometimes we support laws that benefit us but burden others or negative about laws that we believe impinge upon us. Empower us to live the law of love that Jesus proclaimed as good news, even when it is inconvenient or painful. We ask this in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

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