

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Nehemiah 8:2-6. 8-10 / Luke 1:1-4:14-21)
27.01.2019

Let me begin this morning by saying something by way of introduction to Luke's gospel which the liturgy has us listen to on this Sunday when we start to read our way through the third Good News story of the New Testament. The evangelist explains his purpose in undertaking to compose an ordered account of Jesus' life and ministry for Theophilus. I thought it might be beneficial to us to make a few general comments on some of the particular emphases in Luke's gospel. We will gradually discover the full richness of this evangelist's approach to the person of Jesus and His ministry as we make our way through this Year C of the three-year liturgical cycle.

We could say that what Luke will unpack for us in the whole of his gospel account is contained in essence in those famous words of Isaiah which Jesus proclaimed in the Synagogue of Nazara. This quotation from the prophet presents us with a road map to follow as we set out on the path Jesus opens up before us.

I believe it is true to say that we all speak from the place from whence we have come and what has formed us as persons along the way. This is as true for Luke as for any of us, so let's just recap a little in regard to Luke – what his background was.

Luke was a physician and an historian. This largely explains his presentation of Jesus as One who cared greatly for the suffering and downtrodden. Luke's Christ sets out to bring healing to hurting people, peace to the broken-hearted: those whom history has dealt with unfairly. Already the genealogy of Christ recorded for us in Luke's gospel testifies to the evangelist's desire to make the point that Jesus' ministry was not directed to just some *Chosen Few* – the Jewish People – but to the whole of humanity. It is this which explains the evangelist's concern to trace Jesus' human ancestors back to Adam, *the Father of the whole human race*. The Presentation story contained in Luke's gospel (a text we will hear next Saturday, the 2nd of February) makes the point that Christ came as *a light for all the nations* – a light to be made manifest and borne witness to, starting with the Chosen children of God, Israel, whose glory Christ was, but which will extend to *all the gentile nations*. It seems to me that the Presentation story is central to Luke's understanding of communities, of Church, of society. Luke sees all these groups to be diverse in their make-up. His attention to the persons who figure in the gospel stories he recounts is an indicator of his firm belief that individual persons are to be taken into consideration seriously – each one with his or her particular personality. There is no notion of simply a collective vision which would detract from the value of and need for attention to each one's particularity. In Luke's gospel, Jesus is forever shown to be paying special attention to those people whom contemporary society was inclined to ignore – often doing so for the supposed common good! Luke presents Jesus approaching with respect persons whom society of His day would not have considered worthy of attention: women, children, the poor, the outcasts, lepers, prostitutes, despised tax-collectors, broken men and women... sinners of all sorts. Clearly, Luke is anxious for his readers to grasp that Jesus offered salvation, strength and spiritual recovery to everyone whom He encountered.

The evangelist's purpose in presenting Jesus in the way he does is to help us grasp how, as Christian disciples, we are called to live a continuation of the Master's ministry.

Like all great teachers, Jesus taught by example and not just by the sublime words He uttered. For this reason the sayings we find in the Lucan Beatitudes are illustrated for us in stories relating to the various categories of people mentioned in those *words* of the *New Law*.

Someone has said: *Luke's narrative made it clear that God, through His Son Jesus, reaches out in love to the unlovable of the world.* We will hear a great emphasis placed upon mercy as the year progresses. Ever since our *First Parents' Fall* in the Garden of Eden, God has continually reached out to those overcome with shame to cover their nakedness; He has passionately cared for the broken-hearted and tended to the wounded of body, mind, heart and soul. Luke captures a sense of this, at one and the same time, by a very vivid and yet ever so gentle telling of the Christian story.

If we manage to attune ourselves to Luke's gospel, as we read our way through it this year, we will experience this Good News account for what it really is – what Luke himself clearly intended it to be: *Good News for the poor...* the poor people we are! The essence of the Good News Story is that God loves us – regardless not only of our past mistakes, but also of our present mess. The Lord Himself, and the evangelist with him, wants the poor and needy souls we are – the men and women and young people requiring mercy whom we know ourselves to be – to become evangelists in our turn; people who take up the challenge to share the Christian message with all.

We live at a time when many, not only outside our Churches, but also within them, have lost sight of God's loving will. A great number find it hard to accept and live in conformity with God's way, as revealed in Sacred Scripture. Many have forgotten (let's admit it, *we* have forgotten) so much we are meant to keep in mind. This is where today's first reading comes in, recalling, as it does, the importance of the rediscovery of God's word in the life of His People.

We live at a time when there is a real need for a rediscovery of God's word – similar to that made by the people in Nehemiah's time. We need to bring back to mind the full message of the gospel. The Book of Nehemiah illustrates what happens when people find anew the forgotten wisdom of God's word and are led to bring it back into the centre of their lives. The prophetic figure of Nehemiah turned out to be a key personage in the rebuilding of Jerusalem. He gives us an excellent example of what each one of us can contribute to the rebuilding of the Church at a time when so much looks as if it is falling apart and has declined into ruin, bringing about a crumbling and disintegration of the fabric. What we are witnessing in so many ways and in so many places today is a toppling and collapse of the structures of the past... and it seems impossible to halt this process. It is as if all must collapse to permit a rebuilding on firmer foundations.

Nehemiah's example helps us realise that even when the going is tough we must not allow ourselves to be completely discouraged. Joined to Nehemiah in the rebuilding effort stood Ezra. Together, with God's help, both Nehemiah and Ezra were an encouragement to the people. Their example invites us to follow in their footsteps: to unify to proclaim God's message of life. We need Nehemiah and Ezra figures in this day and age. I'm pretty sure we can all agree on that, but are we just as ready to see that we are called to be such figures? Are we ready to consent to God's call in this respect?

In today's gospel passage the scene is set not only for Jesus' earthly ministry but for our mission also. It befalls the Church – both in its ensemble and in the life of every individual Christian – to pursue Christ's mission in today's world.

All of us have been confided the task of making the gospel known. We are to proclaim its message not only by the words we speak, but also – and before all else – by the example of our lives.

The word who took flesh and lived among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth is meant to take flesh in you and me. Francis of Assisi captures the notion that we are all called to proclaim the Good News constantly by the lives we lead when he states simply: *Preach*

always, when necessary use words. In his own way, St Benedict makes the same point in his *Rule for Monks* when he insists that the Abbot should *teach the brethren not only by his words, but, also, and above all, by his example.* We say in popular speech: *actions speak louder than words.* Something illustrated by a life is more credible than the finest discourse.

So, by way of conclusion, let me suggest that we all dare to ask ourselves some questions this morning. Do we give flesh to the gospel – which, ultimately, is the person of Christ – by our whole way of life? More specifically, we might consider just where we stand in regard to those words we heard spoken by Jesus in the Synagogue of Nazara. We might ask, just how we situate ourselves in regard to announcing *Good News for the poor?* Is goodness evident in our lives? Is there a consciousness of, a genuine consideration for, the poor in our hearts? Are we aware of and attentive to the poverty of those around us? And what about our own existential poverty? Are we able to recognise with the psalmist that we are all of us *poor and needy* people? Only once we can do this, will we ever be able to reach out to the poor around us in a credible way. If it is true for Jesus that *rich though He was, He became poor for our sakes* (to quote the apostle), then, in pursuing Christ's mission, we will understand that we must follow His way. We must learn to become poor. *Blessed are the poor!*

We might go on to ask just where we stand in regard to freedom – other people's liberty and our own.

Following on from this, we must consider the question of blindness – not just physical cecity, but our lack of inner vision, our lack of *insight* which afflicts us. Are we well and truly aware of our own need and that of others to come to the point where all is considered in God's own light – remembering that the word of God in Sacred Scripture is, according to the psalmist *a lamp upon our life's path*, an indicator to help us find our way through the darkness and shadows of life.

I'm sure we would all profit greatly from going through all the expressions of Isaiah's prophetic verses which we heard echoed by Jesus at Nazara, allowing their challenge to touch our hearts and lead us to an honest self-assessment. It is most important that we dare to face up to the practical implications of those prophetic words Jesus reiterated and made His own. We must grasp and engage with what they have to say to us in our daily lives.

Rather than talk more about the content of Jesus' speech, let me just invite you to dare to live a little more self-confrontation in a time of personal reflection today or later on in the week – and to do this guided by Christ's proclamation heard this morning.

I believe that Jesus' words amount to nothing less than a clarion call to give flesh in our lives to what He said on that famous morning when He stood up and opened the scroll in the Synagogue of Nazara – more or less taking Isaiah's words and presenting them to His listeners as the manifesto for the whole of His earthly ministry.

May we make them our life program also!