**THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

**23rd January 2022**

**First Reading Nehemiah 8:2-6 and 8-10**

The probable reason for the choice of this passage today is to draw a parallel between Ezra's reading of the law with Jesus' reading of the prophecy of Isaiah 61 in the synagogue. (see the gospel)

Ezra and Nehemiah had been sent by the Persians to re-establish Temple sacrifice in Jerusalem. In the ruins of the Temple, they found a discarded copy of the Law in Hebrew (Hebrew ‘Torah’). The Hebrew language had fallen into disuse and so it was read to the people in translation. It was what we call ‘Deuteronomy’ and had been lost from sight during the Exile.

Returning to Judah following seventy years of Babylonian exile, the Jewish nation as well as the city had to be rebuilt. Reconstruction was the work of these two men. The political reorganization was carried out by Nehemiah, appointed by the Persian overlords as governor of the tiny province of Judah. The Persians entrusted Ezra with the task of reconstituting the Jewish religion - he was 'Minister of State for Jewish Affairs'.

This passage stands at the transition of Judaism from a primitive, superstitious religion to the more ethical and literary one we know to-day. It offers a model of synagogue worship: the reading of the Torah, with the people standing, and the "giving of the sense" of it (that is, its exposition) so that the people will understand clearly; and finally the petitions of the people.

A similar liturgical order may be glimpsed in the synagogue at Nazareth and in to-day’s Christian Liturgy of the Word, even as far as standing for the reading of the gospel, as the Jews stood for the reading of the Torah. (Equally significant is the sitting for the exposition, which is the traditional posture for learning)

From this time onwards the life and religion of Jews became moulded by the Torah, and Judaism adopted its distinctive characteristic of conformity to the Law. It was from this time that Jews began to reverence the written text and treat it as divinely authoritative. This respect for the old Hebrew scriptures was inherited by Christians and gradually applied to the New Testament writings but only as they aged. It was also later adopted in a more extreme form by Muslims towards the Qu’ran.

**Responsorial Psalm: 19:7-9, 14**

This psalm is typical of the post-Exilic respect for the Torah and dates from the same period as the first reading. The Torah came to embrace a wider meaning than simply Moses’ commandments, though of course it included them. This wider meaning included the whole of God's revelation. For the Christian, the word of God became even more extensive because it embraced the person of Jesus as the Word-made-flesh.

Note that the refrain comes from John 6:63 and refers to the teachings of Jesus, specifically to his discourse on the bread of life. Hence the psalm is not only a response to God's self-revelation in the law as proclaimed by Ezra, but also a response to Jesus' homily in the Nazareth synagogue, which will be read in the gospel.

**Second Reading Paul’s First letter to the Corinthian Church 12:12-30**

The Church is in essence the people of God coming together in one place to exercise their faith as one body. This is the scene behind the first reading when Ezra read the scriptures to the people, who were of the old covenant. The same principle is true of the new covenant as witnessed by the word ‘congregation’ which contains within it the sense of movement in coming together.

Thus we have a visible, organised body of known members who form the Jewish people and the same became true for their successors, the Christian Church. There is no idea that divided those same disciples more completely than it did in the 16th century. Reformed Christians place emphasis on personal commitment to Christ, the church being an optional social arrangement. Catholics emphasise the organic and authoritative body that we find in the New Testament.

The Catholic claims that his vision of the Church is that which Christ intended for his disciples. But it is not a simple alternative. The Catholic, as much as the Protestant is still dependant on the disciples having understood Christ correctly. Paul’s metaphor of the Church being the Body of Christ on earth is key.

Paul’s understanding is rooted in his Damascus experience (Acts 9;1-19) when he crucially identifies the Church with the resurrected Body of Christ. He expands this conviction in to-day’s reading with each member contributing to the whole. As such it is a visible organisation with known members having offices and ceremonies which will be recognised by the Catholic.

Yet, Christ did not establish his Church with its organisation fully developed from the start. It evolved in response to changing circumstances. (The office of Deacon, for instance was created because of the increasing pressure on the Apostles. Acts 6;1-6) At the time of Paul’s letter this was still at an early stage in Corinth. Of all members, he mentions Apostles first as being the most important in rank. These would have included the Twelve, with a few others of similar status. Prophets came second, which to-day we would call Preachers. Third in rank were Teachers (aka Catechists) who would instruct converts. There could also have been Deacons, though maybe none in Corinth, but it would have been too early for Bishops, who later represented the Apostles as they died out and Priests who later represented Bishops as their dioceses expanded.

The remaining charisms in Paul’s letter are miracle-workers, healers, helpers, administrators and linguists in descending order of importance.

**Gospel Luke 1:1-4 and 4:14-21**

From today until the thirty-fourth Sunday inclusive, Gospel readings are from the gospel of Luke. Luke was a Gentile, a medical Doctor and companion of Paul. He was highly literate as shown by the ‘Classical’ Greek style of the first paragraph of his Gospel as printed in the Sunday Missal. From the second paragraph we have the ‘Common’ Greek style of everyday use.

When he was in his mid-thirties, Jesus had left Nazareth and established a positive reputation in Galilee as a popular teacher and healer. (Mark 1;14-5;43) This period, of about a year, is foreshortened by Luke into two sentences (Luke 4;14-15) after which Jesus returns home. His family were known locally and the neighbours must have been intrigued, even proud, of the notoriety that preceded him.

There was no authoritive ordained clergy in Judaism and in the synagogue it was customary to invite visitors to address the congregation. Jesus took up the offer and asked for the scroll of Isaiah. This is evidence of his literacy, and familiarity with the text for there were no vowels in Classical Hebrew and no spaces between the words either. In effect, the reader had to know the text by heart beforehand.

The original had been addressed to exiles, just released from slavery and was intended to strengthen their resolve. It has many links with the epic ‘Suffering Servant’ passages, which the Church early on applied to Jesus. The anointing mentioned implies divine authority and the ‘Lord’s year of favour’ implies the presence of the Messiah. The whole expressed the mood of the age.

Having repudiated in his temptations (Luke 4;1-13) the various false conceptions of Messiahship current among the Jews, Jesus publishes his commission to inaugurate God's year of jubilee. He is greeted first with enthusiasm and then with doubt, and finally is threatened with mob violence. The specific trigger for this is not mentioned, but it could be the hint at the inclusion of the Gentiles with Jews in the new order, or it could be the self-importance they saw in his implicit claim.

Finally, there is one rather fine distinction to be drawn between different meanings of the phrase, the ‘Word of God’ as related to Jesus of Nazareth.

For Luke Jesus was certainly the ‘Word of God’ but in a rather different sense to that in John. For Luke, the ‘word’ was the message of the prophets throughout the history of the Jewish people. This was ‘revelation’ So Luke sees Jesus as the culmination of this prophetic tradition. He is God’s final and most complete ‘word’ or message addressed to humanity. (Acts 10: 36-37).

But John took the phrase to a wholly new level. Of course, he was writing a generation later than Luke, and it may be said that his ideas were the result of longer reflection. But by combining Hebrew prophecy and Greek philosophy he identifies the Logos with the life of God before Creation. (see notes for Christmas 2 on 2nd January)