

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 25, 2004

By Father Charles Bowes

Nehemiah 8:2-4, 5-6, 8-10
1 Corinthians 12:12-30
Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21
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Today and every day, God fulfills the promise found in the Scriptures.

When I was ordained a priest, one of my brothers said to me, “Well, Charlie, after the first three years you should have it pretty easy to give a homily – you can use what you’ve done before.” “Jack,” I said, “you don’t have a clue. I can’t just use what I’ve done before. I’ll be different. The world will be different. And the people will have changed. The Scriptures speak in the power of the Spirit to every age and require new insight that falls on me to provide.”

Jesus said as much when he stood before that synagogue and read from the prophet Isaiah, saying, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, and has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, release to the prisoners, and to announce a year of favor from the Lord.” But then Saint Luke portrays him as adding, “Today, this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus was saying something new: proclaiming a new event, the result of his being there. He in himself was the privileged location of the experience of God. Those who met Jesus would meet no less than God. Things had changed. The people had changed. They would never hear that Scripture passage in the old way again.

We hear a familiar scripture, and perhaps we do not listen as intently as we could because we’ve heard it all before. Like when I asked a young person what kept him from attending Mass regularly, he said, “I know how the story turns out. I’ve heard it all before.” But we haven’t! That’s right, we haven’t heard it all before, because when we heard or read that scripture three years ago, or last month, or last week, we were in a different place – not a different physical place, but a different place mentally and spiritually. We’ve had new experiences since that time. The world has changed, and it changes very quickly. And so the Word will speak to our new situation in a different way than before, and will ask that we be open to receive the Word, to surrender to it.

What’s more, we won’t all hear the Word in the same way. There will be differences. There are differences – big ones. As Saint Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, “God has made the body...that there may be no dissension, but that all the members may be concerned for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer; if one member is honored, all share in the joy.”

It’s no secret that the Church is in a time of crisis from within. Like the Corinthians’ church of old, we have to consider who and what we are. We know only too well how revelations of abuse within the church have not only shaken confidence, but have even

produced divisions within the body. Theological disputes set one group against another. Important missions in the name of Jesus, of justice, peace, reconciliation, hunger relief, and healing are sadly reduced and made less effective when disaffected and dissident people withhold their gifts.

None of these can be considered problems of only one part of the Church, the Body of Christ. If Saint Paul is right, in his word to the Corinthians and to us, then whatever affects one part of the body affects us all. Yes, though we have differences, “we are baptized into one body and have been given to drink of the one Spirit.”

None of us can ignore the struggles and pain of any other part of the Body. We cannot rightly say that we do not care what happens in some other part of the members of Christ, or that we have no need of them. Our baptism in Christ binds us together with an indissoluble bond.

The trials of the early churches were not fatal. The church survived and eventually thrived, and the world was changed, and changes still. The words of Isaiah, which Jesus read on that Sabbath day, are instructive to us. Perhaps we can hear them in a new way for our time: “The spirit of the Lord is upon us; therefore, he has anointed us. He has sent us to bring glad tidings to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, release to those who are captive, and to proclaim the Lord’s reign.” Jesus’ words following his reading of the Word is the gospel we are called to embody in ourselves. He tells us, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” And so it is today, and will be in every age, in ways ever new and challenging.

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