

Christian Living

a sermon preached on the

3rd Sunday of Epiphany

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lecton: Nehemiah 8: 2-10; 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a; Luke 4: 14-21

This is one of those rare Sundays when the theme of the first and second readings, together with the Gospel have a very similar message – “Faith Community.”

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem he found more than broken walls - he found broken lives. He found that the worship of God and community fellowship had fallen by the wayside. Living standards had hit an all time low.

Nehemiah, as Governor, was a man of action. From the moment he arrived in Jerusalem everyone knew who was in charge. In spite of opposition, he organised, managed, supervised, encouraged, met with the opposing factions, confronted injustice, and kept going until the city walls were rebuilt.

On completion of the restoration project he turned his attention to the plight of the people. He called upon Ezra, (the scribe and priest), and in partnership they gathered the body of the people into the town square, where Ezra read to them from the law of Moses, bringing about repentance and a commitment to return to live according to the law.

Nehemiah and Ezra were different people with different gifts, yet God used them both to lead the people.

“The Gospel” tells us that Jesus was also proclaiming the word of God, in the synagogue at Nazareth, his home town, where he grew up. He claims for himself the prophesy of Isaiah, and uses it to announce a programme for his ministry. In today’s language we could refer to it as “ the mission statement of Christ.”

When the scroll of Isaiah was brought to Him, He read to the people:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free! to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

Like a lot of others I have read this passage from Isaiah many times over the years, and I suppose, like most people, I jumped at the obvious, in order that I could use it as a mandate for community ministry, and believe me I used it like a whip to motivate people to reach out to the marginalised of our society. However, let us look at it from another angle. Let us suppose Jesus took the scroll and read it like this:

“The Spirit of the Lord in on me, because He has anointed me. In baptism I received the fullness of the Holy Spirit. I had the power, the wisdom and the love of God in me. I came to announce the good news; I came to free the captives of sin by making my mercy available to all those who ask for pardon. I came to heal the sick, not only in their bodies, but also in their soul. I came to open the eyes of the blind, not just physically but spiritually, to bring them from darkness into light. I came to free those oppressed by evil. I came to proclaim the goodness and mercy of God. I am the Lord your God, I am Spirit. I have come to offer you my Holy Spirit, so that you may receive my gifts as member of the Body of Christ.”

Together with the original text this gives a much broader mandate for ministry, and I am sure still motivates us to reach out to those less fortunate than ourselves.

Today in medicine, there is so much specialisation that the body tends to be broken up into parts. Some doctors specialise in the heart, some in the brain, and many more areas which we will not mention. They may be concerned only in that which is their field, and know scarcely anything else about the person whose eye, heart or hip they are treating.

The human body forms a unity even though it is composed of many members, which are very different from each other, and have very different functions. Yet to be complete, the members need each other. So it is with the Church. As we say in the Eucharist – “We who are many are one body.”

In our reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul gives clear direction on the benefits of unity and pulling together as a faith community.

By means of our baptism, we, though many, form one body in Christ. Some might want to go it alone, independent of the community. Those who cut themselves off, wound the community. However, as a community of faith, we are part of one another. We need each other, just as the parts of the body need each other, and the church needs all of us.

Belonging to a community has obvious benefits. People take courage from knowing each other, encouraging each other and standing by each other in a time of need. This is how Jesus wanted it to be.

The fruit which Jesus desires from us is primarily that of unity among ourselves. By this, all will know that we belong to Him by the bond that exists between us and the care we show for one another.

Amen.

References: Luke 4: 14-21
 Nehemiah 8: 2-10
 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a
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