

January 23, 2022
3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Neh 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10
1Cor 12:12-30
Lk 1:1-4; 4:14-21

In order to fully appreciate the implications of today's gospel in our lives, I think we first need to put ourselves into the headset of a 1st century Jew sitting in a synagogue listening to a fellow member of the congregation read from Third Isaiah written 500 years earlier. If we can understand their experience on this particular Sabbath, it will enhance our understanding of what today's gospel means for us in our time and place 2000 years later.

When Jesus announces at the conclusion of His reading that "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing", I imagine you could have heard a pin drop. People would have lost their dentures had dentures existed then. By making that statement Jesus told the assembly that He, Himself, is the subject of Isaiah's prophecy. Just imagine the shock; the speechlessness; and, ultimately, the outrage that we know follows.

Jesus is telling the people that He has been anointed by God. Isaiah's prophecies were written in Hebrew. The scroll Jesus was reading from would have been in Hebrew. The Hebrew word for "anointed one" is "messiah". So, Jesus has just introduced Himself as the Messiah, and the meaning of that statement would not have been lost on an assembly of 1st century Jews in a synagogue. The drama of that moment cannot be understated.

Jesus then announces, using the words of Isaiah, that He has come to "bring glad tidings to the poor". His audience must have thought: "What's up with this "poor" stuff?" For in that time and place the

cultural belief was that riches were a sign of God's favor and approval. So, if you were poor, you must have done something to deserve punishment from God. In the millennia since that time, we have come to understand that Jesus came to bring good news to all the poor, including the spiritually poor. That means all of us. For we are poor when we believe that we are in control. We are poor when we don't feel a burning need for God in our lives. We are poor when we feel we can be in right relationship with God without being in right relationship with the community that surrounds us. So, the good news in today's gospel is that Jesus is here for us to save us from ourselves.

In the words of Isaiah, Jesus goes on to say that He came to "proclaim liberty to captives". In the Hellenistic culture of the ANE, to liberate someone meant to forgive someone. Jesus came to bring forgiveness to liberate us from our weaknesses and our wounds and our destructive habits. He also came to teach us to forgive as well as to ask for forgiveness because forgiveness is liberating to both the forgiver and the forgiven. By liberating us

captives with His forgiveness, Jesus frees us to move on with our lives in peace and with restored hope.

Again, using the words of Isaiah, Jesus tells the people of His time and our time that He came to bring "sight to the blind". When Jesus cures the physically blind in the gospels, He also cures their spiritual blindness, and He sends them forth as agents to cure the spiritual blindness of others. Jesus is here for us today to cure our blindness to help us see God's presence in our lives and in the lives of others around us. Jesus wants to open our eyes wide enough to see God's presence even in the crosses in our lives. The ultimate sight that Jesus wants to give us is the ability to see our lives as God sees them, lives to be used as instruments of God's grace and mercy for others.

Finally, In the words of Isaiah, Jesus tells the people that He came to "let the oppressed go free". Many of the people who Jesus encountered in the gospels were oppressed by the society and culture of their time and place:

- Women, like the adulterous woman and the woman at the well.
- Lepers who were cast out of society.
- Criminals like the Good Thief on the cross.
- Tax collectors like Matthew who Jesus invited into His inner circle.
- Shepherds who were invited to the manger bed; and even
- Gentiles like the Magi who brought gifts to the newborn King and the Egyptians who sheltered the Holy Family from Herod.

In every encounter with the oppressed, Jesus brings great improvement to their situation by helping them overcome their burdens. He helps them to become grateful and therefore capable of becoming His disciples. He deeply touches each and every one of their lives.

I suspect that each of us at some time or other during our lives have been on the receiving end of Jesus' glad tidings and liberation and sight restoration and freedom from oppression. Now, as members of the Body of Christ, it's up to us to continue Jesus' work and take care of the poor and the blind and the captive and the oppressed just as Jesus takes care of us. That means works of mercy for the physically poor; evangelization to the spiritually poor; the light of God's Word to the blind; the granting of forgiveness to and the seeking of forgiveness from those with whom we are not in right relationship; and our support for--even leadership of--social justice causes—to be voices for the voiceless and friends to the friendless.

As we continue our celebration today, let us pray for the grace to fulfill our Christian obligations like Isaiah prophesied and Jesus promised. May we be one body in Christ.