

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year C



FIRST READING
Nehemiah 8:2–4, 5–6, 8–10

PSALM
Psalm 19:8–10, 15

SECOND READING
1 Corinthians 12:12–30

GOSPEL
Luke 1:1–4, 4:14–21

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PRAYER

Psalm 19:8–10, 15

The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.
Let the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

READING THE WORD

First Reading

Nehemiah 8:2–4, 5–6, 8–10

The priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah,

Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 12:12–30

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot

would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assis-

tance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

Gospel
Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has 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 favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

HEARING THE WORD

“Liberation from Ignorance”

With this third Sunday of Ordinary Time, guided by the Gospel of Luke, we begin our journey through the ministry of Jesus. In the first step, we will look at the very start of Jesus’

mission which reveals that one of his chief goals was to liberate the people from ignorance. Indeed, this is one of chief goals for many great religious leaders.

The first reading comes from the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was an energetic and very capable governor of Judah about 450 B.C., responsible for the developing his country in the years following the Babylonian exile. He rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, conducted a sweeping social reform, and reorganized the ill-functioning Temple, which had very recently been rebuilt. Ezra was a priest and a religious scholar who worked alongside Nehemiah. He was responsible for a far-reaching religious reform. Together, they raised Judah and its people up from chaos, religious indifference, and poverty.

Today’s passage gives us a glimpse of the work of Ezra. Even though exile ended almost a century before, things were going badly for Judah and its inhabitants. Religious confusion, lawlessness, religious indifference and adaptation of pagan practices and customs were rampant. Religious reform was desperately needed. Ezra’s reform begins with a great public ceremony. He gathered the people and publicly read out to them the text of “the book of the law”. This was the Torah – the first five books of the Bible – which contain a comprehensive definition of Jewish identity, and the way of life unique to them. The peoples’ response to what they heard was a solemn “Amen” followed by an act of worship. They received and accepted the words of the Torah as God’s word and God’s law.

Next, Ezra and his assistants explained and inter-

preted the meaning and implications of this law for the daily life of the Jews. The people responded with mourning and weeping, recognizing that their manner of life was far removed from God’s ways. But Ezra called them to feast and celebrate. Instead of focusing on the mistakes of the past, he wanted them to rejoice at their liberation from ignorance of God’s ways. Equipped with the knowledge of, and guided by, God’s law, the people of Judah could now begin working towards their internal renewal as God’s people.

The second reading continues with the presentation of how Paul dealt with the problems of divisions and misuse of the charismatic gifts in the Corinthian community. He explained that all gifts, though different, are complementary and indispensable. To explain this, he used the image of the human body which consists of many different parts. Each of these parts is designed to perform a unique function, but only together can they make the entire body function properly. Furthermore, Paul points out that some organs in the body that are perceived as weak and less dignified receive even greater attention than others. These very simple images and statements serve to make several crucial points regarding the Christian community.

First, Paul teaches the Corinthians that through baptism and the gift of the Spirit they became members of one body, no matter what their former ethnic or social status, they now form one new organism. Their individual gifts serve to make this new body function as one, in harmony. The diverse gifts and ministries in the community are a result of God’s

purposeful design for the Church. They are meant to be complementary in mutual service. It is true that some gifts and ministries are more important than others. For example, apostleship takes priority over speaking in tongues. Yet, a Christian ought not to strive for gifts that he or she has not been given - not all can be apostles! Still, all ministries are equal in dignity if not in importance. God gave the Corinthians gifts according to his own design and will, and they should not attempt to change that. Furthermore, Paul views the Christian community as an intrinsic unity, so interconnected that if one suffers all feel the pain, and when one is honoured, all rejoice.

Through this complex explanation Paul aimed to create a sense of solidarity and mutual responsibility, combined with pride and contentment with what each received. He also intended to lead them out of their narrowminded focus on individual self-importance towards a liberating, broad perspective of their life as organic members of one community. Paul knew that such knowledge, if acted upon, would put an end to divisions and unhealthy competition.

Today's gospel reading consists of two distinctive passages. The first contains the opening lines of Luke's Gospel, where the author defines his purpose and method. He intends to write a coherent and systematically arranged account of Jesus' life in order to set the faith of his patron, Theophilus, on firm foundations. Thus, Luke aims to lead Theophilus and all other readers away from ignorance and uncertainty, to a sound understanding of Jesus and the events of his life.

The second passage nar- rates the very first event of

the public ministry of Jesus which took place in Nazareth, his hometown. Speaking in the synagogue, Jesus publicly presented the program for his ministry using the prophecy of Isaiah as his reference (cf. Is 61:1-2). After the introductory two lines, this prophecy describes Jesus' mission in five, purposefully arranged, lines. The first and the fifth lines define Jesus' mission as the proclamation of the good news and God's year of favour. The second and the fourth lines focus on the liberation of captives and the oppressed. The third and central statement describes Jesus as bringing "recovery of sight to the blind." In such a parallel literary arrangement, the central element is always the most important and conveys the most significant message. Thus, Jesus' main mission will be to liberate the people from blindness. This is exactly what was already stated about him in the prophecies of Zechariah and Simeon (Luke 1:71; 2:32). Jesus came to bring people out of their ignorance to the liberating light of knowledge of God, the ways of God's kingdom, and God's plan of salvation for humanity. His entire ministry, up to the gates of Jerusalem, will be predominantly focused on teaching and revealing God through his words and deeds. Luke knew that this was Jesus' purpose. Therefore, he wrote his Gospel so that Theophilus and other Christians might base their faith on a sound and clear understanding of who Jesus was, what he did, and what was his purpose in the world.

Today's readings focus on the theme of liberation from ignorance. Ezra begins his religious reform by teaching the people God's law which defines their way of life, so that they may be God's people not only in name but in truth. Paul combats the Corinthians' divisiveness

by explaining the nature of their community. He hopes that this knowledge will enable them to grow and use their gifts in the right way. Luke wrote his gospel to bring Theophilus and other readers to a sound understanding of Jesus and his mission. Jesus himself defined his purpose as leading people out of blindness to the knowledge of God and his ways. Both Luke and Jesus knew that faith needs firm foundations in understanding. The Psalmist held the same view announcing, "the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart, the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes."

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

Struggle for liberation has always been one of the driving forces for humanity. Throughout history, individuals and nations have constantly fought for liberation from political oppression, economic hardships, illiteracy, disease and abuse. Ignorance and confusion can also be counted among the oppressive forces that threaten human life and dignity. It is enough to recall the present danger of "fake news", which, by manipulating social media, pose such a danger to the freedom of society and individuals.

As Christians, we must always be grateful to God, and greatly appreciate the grace of knowledge and understanding of God, and his ways, revealed to us through Jesus and Scripture. This revelation continues in our midst through the Holy Spirit and the Church. As Christians we have been provided with all the tools and means necessary to be safe from the confusion and manipulation of false teachers, misguided ideologies and damaging cultural influences.

Sadly, many of us today extend very little effort to deepen our understanding of faith and Scripture. A priest friend recently told me how one of his parishioners came asking for an explanation of the puzzling parable of the dishonest servant in Luke 16:1-9, which appears to recommend dishonesty and cheating. After the priest had spent quite some time explaining this difficult parable, the parishioner finally waved his hand in a gesture of resignation saying, "this is just too difficult, it is enough for me just to listen to these readings, and not to think too much." In the light of today's readings, I wonder what would have happened if the Israelites who listened to Ezra, or to Theophilus reading the Gospel of Luke had reacted the same way. It is true that many aspects of our faith and passages of the Scripture are difficult to understand with our modern minds. But the same was true for the people in the time of Ezra, for the Corinthians, and for Theophilus and other Christians. Understanding the meaning of God's words and ways has been challenging for the people in every age. This is the case because God's ways are far beyond our simple daily beliefs and customs, and our purely human way of thinking. Therefore, we need to extend considerable effort if we are ever to grow out of childish and purely human thinking, to maturity and Christian understanding of life.

Many Christians come to Church expecting miracles, entertainment and simple answers. But maturing faith cannot remain only on the level of socializing and mindless routines. Luke did not write his gospel to make people jump and shout, but to lead his Christian readers to understand Jesus, his words, and their own roots.

Fortunately, today we have access to a wide variety of educational materials and resource persons in our communities and parishes. A wide variety of training programs and guides are offered on the internet, such as "LectioYouth.Net". It is surprising however, how few of us are willing to devote time and energy to reach out and make use of these resources and possibilities. We prefer entertainment and socializing to study and prayer. But a balanced and firmly founded Christian life needs both. Our social and community activities must lead to a growing awareness of who we are and why we come together as a Church. Today's liturgy calls us to examine what use do we make of the knowledge and resources offered to us by the Scripture and the Church. These are the means to lead us out of ignorance, make us ever more mature, and to protect us from deception and manipulation.

PROVERB

*“Not to know
is bad,
but not to wish
to know
is worse.”*

ACTION

Self-examination:

When was the last time I participated in some educational activity in my parish, such as a workshop or a

training program? What new insights into the Scripture and the teaching of the Church have I had recently? Name a few.

Response to God:

In my daily prayer I will consistently express my gratitude to God for revealing himself and his Son to me, and for giving me the Scripture and the Church to guide me.

Response to your World:

I will identify and systematically read a book which will help me to deepen my knowledge and understanding of a chosen biblical book. As a group we shall organize an educational activity, a workshop or a Bible study, to help us grasp St Luke's method for leading Theophilus and other Christians to a deeper faith.

PRAYER

*Lord God
you alone are the source
of true knowledge
and wisdom.
With deep gratitude,
we thank you
that you have chosen
to reveal yourself to us
and to instruct us
on how to live
a truly human and Christian life
following your ways.
You have laid down the paths
that can lead us to you,
keep us on those paths
and give us
the sound understanding
of your ways.
Let your word
be the lamp for our feet.
Amen.*