

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time C/2013

The readings of this third Sunday of Ordinary time talk about the importance of the word of God and its value. They invite us to put it at the center of our life so that it helps us build a unified Christian community.

The first reading of the book of Nehemiah recalls what the priest Ezra did in order to maintain the unity of the people of Israel after their return from exile in Babylon. In fact, Ezra gathered before him all the people, men, women and children of age of understanding. He read to them the stipulations and the regulations of the Law.

As he was blessing God, all the people listening to the word, prostrated before God and adored him with their faces to the ground. Like one man, they all answered "Amen" with hands raised high. Then, Ezra and the Levites helping him invited them not to cry, but rather to be happy, because that day given to them by the Lord was holy.

What is behind this text is the idea that the word of God contributes to the unity of his people. Another idea is the truth that the word of God sets the obligations we have to fulfill toward God as he reaches out to us where we live. That is why God joins us in the concrete situations of our life which he wants to transform for our good.

This text helps us understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus makes his first proclamation of the word in the synagogue. First of all, Luke describes his Gospel as an account of historic events that took place in the midst of the people of Israel.

He affirms also that the Gospel is not a human invention, but rather a faithful transmission of what he has received from the eyewitnesses of the word from the beginning of Jesus to his return to the Father.

Finally, Luke speaks of the presence of Jesus in the synagogue of Galilee where he was preaching with authority under the power of the Holy Spirit who was in him.

What do we learn from this Gospel? The first thing I want to highlight is about the historicity of Jesus. When Luke says that, after having investigated the accuracy of the events that took place in their country, he has written them down in an orderly sequence, he is establishing the historicity of Jesus as a public figure in the Jewish society.

In fact, Jesus Christ is not a myth, a tale or a fiction. He is a historical person who lived in Galilee at a well-known period of time of Jewish society, who taught in their places of prayer and who was admired by the people.

History recognizes that Jesus was unique both through his teaching and his action. That uniqueness comes out of the fact that he was not only the son of Mary and Joseph, but also the son of God. As a son of God he has received a special mission from God, namely to bring joy to the poor, freedom to the prisoners, consolation to the afflicted and healing to the sick. That is the reason why he was anointed by the Holy Spirit so that he might become a source of hope for those believing in him.

The quintessence of that mission is nothing else than to make a difference in the lives of people who meet him. Therefore, Jesus has come in order to transform individual and collective history so that all may find a reason to hope again. In that perspective, Jesus stands in the middle of the history of people in order to give them joy and consolation.

That is why our own personal and collective history cannot find its true meaning outside Jesus. As long as we have not found Jesus, we stay away from a source of peace, freedom and healing that only God can give.

The second thing I want to highlight is about the demise of horizontal Christianity. I call horizontal Christianity a practice of religion that is limited to the human aspect of things and that cares only for the things which are within the horizon. The horizontal Christianity says, for instance, that religion is something between you and your God. You do not need to go to the Church. You can adore God wherever you are and whenever you want. If you can adore him in your neighbor, that is fine. In the end, the horizontal Christianity is a type of humanism covered with the word God.

I raise this question because of what I see in the Gospel. In fact, Jesus had serious reasons for not going to the synagogue or the temple, because of permanent religious conflict between him and the Pharisees and the scribes.

And yet, in spite of all that, he went to the synagogue. He certainly did not agree with the scribes and the Pharisees over some of their teachings and beliefs, but still, he did go. Why? Because that was for him an opportunity to join God's people in order to listen to God's word and worship him.

Listening to the word of God in the presence of brothers and sisters during the celebration of the Holy Eucharist has something more special than just to listen to it in the privacy of a room.

In the gesture of Jesus, there is also the recognition of the importance of the community of believers, which is the Church. Of course, there is no denial of personal faith and what an individual can do in his relation with God, but there is also the truth that where two or three are gathered in God's name, God is present in a very tangible way.

That is why St Paul insists on the importance of the community that he compares to a body. Our spiritual growth and well being as a Church depends on our integration and our understanding of what it means to be a community. As the hand cannot be separated from the arm without harming the whole body or the eye from the face without disfiguring the individual, we cannot exist without one another.

Positively, it means that we need one another, like the hand that needs the eye, or the ear that needs the foot, in order for the body to be in good shape. Our personal gifts and talents are beneficial to our fellow Christians. We cannot keep our gifts for ourselves without harming the fellows and the community.

Let us pray, then, that God may help us to understand that we have to stay in unity with one another around the power of his word. May he help us to use our different gifts and talents for the good of our fellow Christians!

Nehemiah 8: 2-4a, 5-6, 8-10; 1 Corinthians 12: 12-30; Luke 1: 1-4; 4: 14-21



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