

Homily for the Third Sunday of Ordinary Time, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2019

*Jesus offers us his mercy, freedom and joy.*

Because of the way the liturgy works we are to all intents and purposes in the synagogue with Jesus right now. The Church teaches us that whenever the Bible is proclaimed in the assembly of the faithful, Jesus speaks directly and personally to all those who listen. So we are not at a disadvantage to his townsmen who were looking at him so intently at this moment, as we heard St Luke recount. We cannot see his face as they could, a face that was very familiar to them. But we can enter into the dramatic moment alongside them, we can experience the silence in the building as everybody wonders what is going to happen next and we can hear Jesus announcing through the person of his minister: "Today this text is being fulfilled even as you listen."

It's the word "today" that is the key to interpreting what Jesus is saying to us. Sometimes we fall into the mistaken view that our faith is *about* Jesus, as if he were a historical personage whom we with everybody else can admire, and do so, safely, from a distance. But God is always addressing us in the present moment. Jesus has something different to say to us today than he had yesterday. He wishes to encounter us today, on this chilly night/morning in south Bradford. He is glad that he has caught our attention and now he wishes to exploit this auspicious moment by communicating to us the fruits his victory over the Kingdom of Darkness. As the men in the synagogue had eyes only for him and what he was about to say, so Jesus this evening/morning has eyes only for me and about how I am to respond to his gracious intervention in my life.

He quotes the Prophet Isaiah to me who when he wrote this text was looking forward to a moment when God would enter into human history definitively and save his people from everything that afflicted them. Jesus is inviting me to apply Isaiah's words to my own circumstances through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit which is his gift to me. Let me ask myself directly then.: "How am I poor such that Jesus' words to me are good news." Perhaps a helpful way to rephrase this would be to use a modern understanding of poverty and to say: "How do I feel marginalised?"

Each of us could point to different aspects of our lives. Perhaps straightforwardly we have a low income and we suffer because we cannot afford those pleasures that others sitting in the benches beside us are able to enjoy. Perhaps we feel that we are marginalised because others judge us due to our lifestyle, our personal history, our ethnicity, our lack of educational

qualifications, our sexual orientation – the list is a long one and its constituent parts are peculiar to each of us.

How can Jesus bring me in from the margins and make me feel more included? How can he enrich me in my poverty? I think that it would probably have been enough for the members of the assembly to look into Jesus' eyes as he scanned the benches for them to have begun to understand how this might come about. As their eyes met his they were encountering something hitherto unknown in the world: pure, unconditional love. We too have experienced that love. We experience it in the sacraments. Also occasionally when we have met somebody who is truly holy, that is to say somebody who has a heart to serve others and to respect them in the complicated circumstances of their lives, then we experience Jesus' love. Those moments are blessed moments because for as long as they last we feel entirely accepted for who we are in our brokenness and our inner conflictedness.

Then Jesus tells me that he has come to free me from captivity. To revert to my original point, he is offering me freedom *now*. In what way am I imprisoned? Am I caught up in anger or resentment. Am I incarcerated in a gaol within myself in which I howl desperately because of past mistakes for which I have not yet forgiven myself? Have I succumbed to a particular addiction such I feel I cannot get by without constantly engaging in behaviour which I know makes me unhappy but which I feel I cannot escape from, whether that be drink, drugs, overeating, inveterate gossiping, pornography. We all know the power of such addictions and all of us are experiencing various addictions right now. I will free you from these different causes of unhappiness Jesus tells us.

Then he offers to give us new vision. He has come to bring new sight to the blind, he says, quoting Isaiah. It is at this point that things begin to come together. Jesus is offering to deepen our faith through the action of his Holy Spirit. He is helping us to see who we are more clearly and what it is that God is asking of us.

Now we can set Jesus' words alongside the other two readings in this evening's/morning's Mass. We recognise as St Paul tells us that we are all members of the Body of Christ and that each of us has a particular role within the Church, in the fulfilment of which we give glory to God. Each of us, in other words, possesses an inalienable importance before God. Also, as members of the People of God, the Church, we feel a kinship with the Israelites whom, as we heard in our first reading, God addressed through his Holy Word, the Torah,

as proclaimed by the priest Ezra. This people had only recently returned to the ruins of their city after a long exile and understandably felt very down-hearted. Then, attentively, they listened to God speaking to them, over the course of a whole day, and they realised that he was calling them to action, specifically to build up his holy city once more.

Jesus, who is God, has addressed us this evening/morning and he bids us too to build up the holy city, the new Jerusalem his holy Church. We are anointed just as he is: we have received his Holy Spirit in the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. Now we who have experienced God's mercy are tasked with communicating that mercy to others. God has loved us in our poverty and freed us from our interior prisons of self-loathing. Now we are to be his instruments in the building up of a new civilisation of love in his world in this *today* which is always fresh, always full of hope and where Jesus our Saviour is always to be encountered, not least in the persons of those whom we seek to help in his name.



