

Epiphany 3 – Annual Meeting – Year C

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, *

O LORD, my strength and my redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)

Once in a while, we run across something in the Scriptures that reminds us why we do some of the things we do, or where the custom came from, at least. We have that in this morning's first reading from Nehemiah. Notice what goes on around Ezra's reading from the Torah, the Law. "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."

The Torah was, for the people of Israel, the law of God. It was the source of their relationship to Yahweh, their covenant with God. And in our time, the deacon opens the book of the Gospels in the sight of all the people. And when the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, the source of our *new* covenant relationship with God, is proclaimed, we – too – all stand up. Before the homily, the preacher prays a blessing, and all the people answer, "Amen, Amen!" Note that our Psalm for today, Psalm 19, is the *source* of the blessing often used before the sermon..."Let the words of my mouth..." But back to Nehemiah: "so they read from the book *with interpretation*. They gave the *sense*, so that the people *understood* the reading." It's not an exact parallel, of course. I never hear "Amen, Amen!" – and I haven't seen folks lift up their hands when the sermon is about to begin. But it is nice to see, once in a while, an historical connection between what we do today, and what our forbears in faith did in millennia past.

Nehemiah is writing at a time when the people had returned to Judah after generations of being in exile. They have rebuilt the temple and the city walls. They are 'settling in' to being back. The question before them now, perhaps, is how to rebuild who they are as a people. They had been scattered, among all kinds of other folks. They had, perhaps, adopted differing customs. One group may have done or said things differently than another. How to form *one people* gathered back from the diaspora? Wisely, "all the people of Israel" gathered together and had the priest read the Torah, the law, to them. They gathered together around their covenant with God, as expressed in the law – because that was what held them together, that's what made them a people. The Torah reminded them who God was, and who they were. With that at their center, they could form again one body.

Such a wonderful message for us this morning – gathered together for an annual meeting, during a time of transition! Here we are – gathered together – around the *Gospel*, the good news of God in Christ, and around the Eucharist. These are what bind us together – our baptismal covenant, and the breaking of the bread.

Of course, what we gather around is the good news of *Jesus*, the Word made Flesh. And in today's Gospel, Jesus gives us - as some commentators call it – his inaugural address. In the passage from Luke this morning, we hear Jesus's mission statement as he reads from Isaiah:

"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 then he said: "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."
And he says that to us this morning.

Episcopal priest and author Charles Hoffacker says it this way: “Jesus still does these things, because his church does them. The poor gain hope, whether it’s their souls or their bodies that are starved. The captives experience freedom, whether they are prisoners in a jail or prisoners in a mansion. The blind receive sight, whether it’s cataract surgery at the church hospital or the scales of prejudice falling off the eyes of a bigot. The oppressed are set free, whether oppression is a political regime or a chemical dependence. When Jesus reads that passage in the Nazareth synagogue, he announces a mission statement for himself and for his body, the church.”

A mission statement for his body, the church. Yes, Amen. That is the mission statement we have each signed up to in our baptismal covenant, yes? But it’s the mission statement of this body that is St. John’s as well.

And it is here that Paul’s wonderful exposition on the Body of Christ has particular relevance for us. For Paul calls us, as he did the Corinthians, to recognize and appreciate the diversity of gifts and persons that make up this body of Christ. And each and every one is needed if we are to carry out that mission statement Jesus proclaimed. We may have graceful hands or clumsy feet, I may be the body’s pain in the neck, but we are all needed in this Body of Christ.

Any congregation is in some ways like the people of Israel from our first reading. Over the years, people are scattered. Some move away, some new folks come. Some have stopped coming. One of the tasks set before us in this, our own time of regathering, and a task in particular for the search committee – is to look at who this congregation is now, who are the people gathered, who are we missing. This is a time when we look at who we are as this Body of Christ made of many diverse members, and then continue to discern how we carry out the mission of Jesus, the mission of the Church, the promises of our baptismal covenant: to proclaim, by word and example, the Good News of God in Christ, to bring that good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the Lord's favor.

May it be so. Amen.

[Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10](#) [1 Corinthians 12:12-31a](#) [Luke 4:14-21](#) [Psalm 19](#)