

Homily for The Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C) (24/01/10)

Today's first reading tells us about events that took place about 400-450 years before the birth of Christ. The people of Israel had been exiled in Babylon, and although the Persians who took over the Babylonian empire allowed some of them to return to their own country, it was still a low point in the nation's history. Many chose not to return, because they had become accustomed to their lives in Babylon; the surrounding nations had been rather pleased to have Jerusalem deserted, as it meant they could take over the land that the Israelites had lived on, so the last thing they wanted was a restored Israel, and they harried and bothered those who came back. The people living in Jerusalem felt fragile and demoralised. But then two extraordinary people arrive on the scene. One is Nehemiah, a cup-bearer to the Persian king who heard about the sorry state of Jerusalem, persuaded the king to send him there as governor, and set about rebuilding the city's walls and defences. The other person is Ezra, a scribe, who is given permission to take another group of exiles to Jerusalem, and to instruct the people in their own religion. These two men set about systematically rebuilding Jerusalem: they build up its walls around the newly restored Temple, but they also re-connect the people with their history, with their religious heritage, they help them to realise once again who they are. The work of re-setting the faith of Israel that they did become the foundation for the Judaism we know today. The climax of all their work comes when all the people are gathered together to hear Ezra read. They hear once again the voice of the Lord, and their eyes are filled with tears. They have rediscovered something that was missing from their lives. They have discovered once again the joy of knowing that they are the people of God.

There is something very deep about what Ezra and Nehemiah are doing here. They see how the people have become disconnected from their identity; they have forgotten who they are, and these two men see how desperate a situation this is. Once people lose a sense of who they are they become lost, and demoralised, and frightened, and dangerous. This is as true now as it was two and a half thousand years ago. As human beings we have a tendency to be overwhelmed by the immediate, by the things that face us now, today, and demand our attention. But we can never make a good job of living today if we have forgotten what we did, who we were, yesterday. The experiences of yesterday are the raw material of the wisdom of today. Again and

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again we need to be challenged to ‘remember who we are’, and this is a part of the Church’s priestly role. One of the roles of the priest is to challenge people again and again to remember who they are, to remember where they come from. That is one of the essentials of worship, it leads us into the presence of God and reminds us who we are; it challenges us to remember that we are his creatures, overwhelmed with his generous creative and redeeming love. At mass we are most truly ourselves, most truly human; gathered in solidarity around the throne of the one who loves us and sustains us.

The gospel reading speeds forward a few centuries, to the synagogue in Nazareth, where Jesus speaks to his family and friends, to the people he has known all his life. As he reads these words from Isaiah he is in effect saying to the people who hear him: “Listen to these words; remember what God has promised; believe that he can deliver, and that you are the ones to whom the promise is made; rise to the challenge, look for God’s actions around you, believe that he can do these things, and that you have a part to play in it”. The people must recall once again the awesome truth of who they really are: they are a chosen people, chosen to be a source of blessing for all nations; gathered around their Saviour they are to be good news for the poor, they are to be strength for the downtrodden, they are to open the eyes of those who cannot or will not see the real truth of human existence, they are to set free those who are imprisoned by cynicism, or sin, or possessiveness, or selfishness. They are being called to become more truly what they were always meant to be; and as we read these words, both those of Ezra and those of Isaiah as they are proclaimed afresh by the Lord, we should hear them as if for the first time. They are calling out to us. Remember who you are; remember the heritage from which you sprang; remember what the preceding generations have done, and be true to the heritage.

I want to make a little diversion here into one particular part of our inheritance. You may have read that last Sunday the Pope visited the synagogue in Rome, as his predecessor did 24 years ago. There was quite a lot of news coverage before the event as the press tried to hype it up into a ‘controversial’ visit, but little coverage of the actual event because in fact it was a happy and successful occasion. The Pope was greeted warmly, and his address was interrupted more than once by applause. It is worth reading what he says, because he states unambiguously what the Church really

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believes about relations with the Jewish people. He recognised the wrongdoings of Christians who had been involved in anti-semitism, and he reaffirms that the proper relationship of Catholics and Jews is one of closeness and spiritual fraternity (4). He reminds us, as Catholics, that part of ‘who we are’ is our close relationship to the Jewish people. He reflected on the Ten Commandments in particular, and said that they offer a common ethical code for both faiths. There is much that we share, many issues on which we can act together, because of our shared belief in the Ten Commandments. As Catholics, this is a part of who we are. Briefly, he said there were three areas it is important for our time that we act together. One is our common belief in one Lord, and our resistance to idols. People have invented so many other gods to who they bow down. Together we can reawaken in our society ‘openness to the transcendent dimension’. The second area where we share values derived from the commandments is our belief that every person is precious, made in the image and likeness of God; together we can act to protect the dignity and rights of every person. Finally, we share a belief that the family is the ‘essential cell of society and the basic environment in which human virtues are learned and practised’ (6). One of the objects of his visit was to remind us, as Catholics, of the heritage we share with our Jewish brothers and sisters.

We are gathered together in Petworth today, but we stand in continuity with the people who wept with joy as Ezra read the Book of the Law, and with the people who heard Jesus speak in the synagogue at Nazareth. Today, and at every mass, we are challenged to remember who we are, what God has done for us and our forbears; because it is a real awareness of who we truly are that helps us know what we should do, and also what we might yet hope to become.