

3rd Sunday of the Year, Year C

The readings presented to us on this third Sunday of Ordinary Time have a special interest. The First Reading takes us to the beginnings of Judaism in the fifth century before Christ. The central constitution of Judaism is found in the first five scrolls of the Bible, the Pentateuch. The first of these books, the Book of Genesis, gives the Israelite version of the Near Eastern myths concerning creation and the flood followed by the story of the patriarchs. The rest offer a variety of reflections on Moses, and so on the essence of Judaism. They tell of the dealings of God with the people of Israel and what is expected of them as God's chosen people. These scrolls have a long history, but they reached their final form during and after the exile and so they offer a perspective on the history of Israel that is coloured by the experience of the destruction of Jerusalem and the loss of the temple in the beginning of the sixth century before Christ.

Ezra has come from Babylon, and worked with the priests and the main landowners to produce the final edition of the Torah (or the 'Law'). In today's reading we are given the account of his presenting of the Law to the people in Jerusalem. It is interesting to hear that the books needed to be interpreted to the people. This is because they were written in ancient Hebrew, whereas the language of the people by this time was Aramaic – a language which they had picked up during the exile.

Israel has by this time been reduced to a portion of the tribal lands of Judah, and the religion of the people of Judah (the 'Jews') is the religion based on the contents of the books of the Law presented on this occasion by Ezra and welcomed by the people with 'Amen'. They entered into a renewed covenant with God, determined to put the past behind them, and be faithful to God's will as presented in the books of the Law.

Wherever God's will is expressed in propositions there is a danger that people who lose perspective will become scrupulous and legalistic in their interpretation of the Law. Jesus often pointed this out telling the lawyers to 'go and learn the meaning of the Law' (Matthew 9:13). The First Reading, however, ends with a statement of the joy that knowing God's will brought to the Jewish people. This is reinforced by the Responsorial Psalm

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'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'(Psalm 19:7-8)

They considered it a privilege to know God's special care for them and to know God's will for them. They knew that by obeying God's will they would learn wisdom and keep their hearts open to receive the love that God was offering them.

The Torah consists in two elements. There are the commandments that speak of our response (this accounts for the English translation 'Law'), but more basically there are the accounts of God's presence and redeeming action in the history of his people. Faithful to this tradition, Jesus begins his ministry in the synagogue of his hometown by proclaiming the ministry given him by God, a ministry of revealing God's love to the poor: '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'(Luke 4:18).

When we think of the 'poor' we are right to think in terms of economic poverty and the human misery that goes with it. However, the term is wider than that. It refers to human need in all its dimensions, and especially to our need for love. The 'poor' are those who are in need and who cry out to God in their distress. Jesus is assuring them that in him God is answering their cry: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'. Whatever our personal need and whatever the needs of our society, Jesus has come to draw us into the communion of love which is our most profound need. At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry Luke presents this as the essence of Jesus' agenda.

As disciples of Jesus we are encouraged by Jesus' assurance that our cry is being heard. We are also challenged to join Jesus in carrying on his mission to the poor. As Paul assures us, we do this in different ways according to each person's special gifts of nature and grace. This is the importance of the Church, the body of which each of us is a member. Only together can we create a symphony of love. Only together can we be the heart of Jesus to the world. Only together can we call down the fire of God's love, harness for God the energies of love in our world, and welcome God's Spirit to renew the face of the earth. It matters that each of us plays our part in this. It matters that we welcome the part played by others. And it matters that we do it together as the Body of Christ in the world. This is the new Law given us by Jesus at the last supper: 'Love one another as I have loved you'. This is the new covenant and the essence of Christianity. May it be a source of joy to us as we meditate together on the mission entrusted to us by Jesus.