

HOMILY SUNDAY 03 – C
“The Liberating Power of God’s Word”
(Nehemiah 8:1-4a, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Cor 12:12-3; Lk 1:1-4, 4:14-21)

Has the Word of God ever moved you to tears?

Appreciate the Liberating Power of God’s Word.

In 586 BCE the Israelites were conquered by King Nebuchadnezzar and banished to exile in Babylon. They lost their freedom and became slaves in a foreign land. They could no longer exercise any of their political, cultural, social or religious customs.

In 538 BCE, King Cyrus issued a decree permitting the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. The reading today from Nehemiah describes what it was like for the people to proclaim the Word of God outside the walls of their ruined Temple for the first time in over fifty years. That liturgy of the Word was presided over by Nehemiah, a governor who was very devout, and the scribe Ezra, who was the real father of Judaism with his three dominant concepts: the chosen race, the Temple, and the Law.

Generations had not heard the Word proclaimed in public this way. Imagine the emotion of the adults whose parents had told them of the deportation, how they had suffered as slaves, and how they had tried to pass on the religious traditions to their children. And now, at last, they were free to practice their faith and proclaim God’s word in public. And so they did, in a service of the Word that lasted from dawn to mid-day. That was a long service! And an emotional one, as tears of joy flowed freely, tears of connecting once again to timeless tradition, and tears of commitment to rebuilding their religious way of life.

Closer to our own time, there were those in the Soviet Union who thought that religion had been stamped out, only to see it blossom again after the fall of the Iron Curtain. I remember being told by a friend from Norway how as a youth he and others smuggled bibles into Russia to help the Christians there, and how the recipients would copy them word by word.

Even today, Bishop Paul Hinter of the United Arab Emirate describes how difficult it is for his Catholic Christians to openly profess and practice their faith. Their churches cannot appear to be churches from the outside, and they cannot freely circulate the bible. We who are free to do so, need to grow in our appreciation of the liberating power of God’s Word.

The psalm that we proclaimed today, Psalm 19, has a striking uniqueness to it: every strophe except one has one or more references to the Word of God. Today those references are: law, decrees, precepts, commandment and ordinances, reminding us of our need to make the Word of God central to our lives, and to appreciate its power to sustain and heal us.

The second reading from Corinthians reminds us that we are united by the Word of God into one body, one community of faith. What an appropriate reading for this week of prayer for Christian Unity. It is truly the Word of God that we all have in common, and that can unite us. Hopefully all of us can be part of an ecumenical Liturgy of the Word this week to pray for the unity of all who believe in Jesus as the Messiah, Lord and Savior.

But it is in the gospel that the Word of God truly shines forth in all its splendour. Jesus, the Messiah, the Word of God in person, enters into a Jewish synagogue and proclaims a passage that he applies to himself. Jesus asserts that the new era foretold by Isaiah has begun because he has come to bring it about. While Isaiah's language was figurative, Jesus' healings and miracles were literal pointers to the truth that the new era of God's deliverance had begun and would come to pass through him. He is the one who truly gives sight, who actually has the power to set people free from tyranny. Jesus is clear about his claim – he is the anointed Messiah.

The poor figure more prominently in Jesus' teachings in Luke than in any other Gospel. Jesus released persons from various forms of bondage and oppression: economic (the poor), physical (the lame and crippled), political (the condemned), and demonic (the possessed). Forgiveness of sin, therefore, can also be seen as a form of release from bondage to iniquity. The restoration of sight was closely associated with the prophetic vision of the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. When Jesus restores sight to the blind, he is fulfilling God's work of salvation as foreseen by the prophet Isaiah. Jesus is dramatically fulfilling the role of the one who would be a "light for the nations". Like Jesus, his followers are to be light for others.

Fr. Fullenbach, noted scripture scholar and teacher, tells the story of Martha, a tiny Chinese lady who had been a Maoist fanatic, part of the Red Brigade, and knew nothing of Christianity. At age seventeen, she went to her grandmother's funeral. She was left a little box of her grandmother's belongings, in which she found a little red book of the four gospels printed to look like the Maoist little red book. She read it and realized that this was a message for her people. She knew she needed instruction, saw it was printed in Rome, and got the idea to go to Rome to get to know this book. She sold all she had, bought a train ticket through Russia and Eastern Europe to Italy knowing only Chinese. Undeterred, she hired herself out to a Chinese restaurant, worked for two years and learned perfect Italian and English.

She heard about bible sessions taught by Fr. Fullenbach and asked if she could get into his class. She was not enrolled and had no money. He let her attend. In class, she sat at the back. As the months went by, she got instruction in the Catholic faith and was

baptized. One day, in the middle of lecture on God's plan of salvation for the world and the role of the Church, she jumped up and shouted at top of her voice, "This is it!" and started dancing, ran up to the podium, hugged him and upset the whole class. When asked about her behavior, she said that now she knows why she had to come to Rome. "If I open myself to God's grace, I can reach them all, and I don't have to become a sister!" Now she wanted to go back to China to spread the Good News. She couldn't be ordained, and thought she might have to be a sister. She stayed one year, and left. She had a conviction to preach the gospel, for that was why she had to come to Rome.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is very much like the celebration that we heard in the first reading. We gather as a community of all ages around the Word of God to be taught, healed and empowered. Then we gather around the Table of the Eucharist to receive the very Body and Blood of Jesus, Lord, Messiah and Savior, who commissions us to go out as light to the world to be Good News for all.

Hopefully, we can also feel some of the emotion that was felt on that day, centuries ago, by our Judaic ancestors and appreciate, even more so than they could, the liberating power of the Word of God.