

A Sermon for Epiphany III, Year C
January 21, 2007 — Fr. Jim Cook
Texts: Nehemiah 8: 2-10; Luke 4: 14-21

Listening With Understanding.

This morning we heard readings from Nehemiah and Luke which were about people hearing readings from the Bible. And, in the reading from Luke we heard about someone offering up a sermon that was based upon a reading that the people have just heard. That's the church's version of *deja vu*. In any event, let's see what's going on in these readings.

Before we can tackle the reading from Nehemiah, that's some background information that we need to consider. In 597 BC, the Babylonian empire conquered the southern Jewish kingdom of Judah. During the next fifteen years, a huge number Jews were taken from their homeland to live in exile in Babylon, and the city of Jerusalem and the Temple were demolished down to their foundations. However, someone had the foresight to hide a copy of the Jewish scriptures so that, even after the destruction of the city and Temple, they remained safe. In 537 BC, sixty years after the first deportation, the Persians overthrew the Babylonians and Cyrus, the ruler of the Persians, gave permission for the Jews to return to their homeland, and some forty thousand Jews took advantage of that opportunity. Twenty-two years later, in 515 BC, the Temple had finally been rebuilt. Now, sometime between 515 and 450 BC, someone found those hidden scrolls, and under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Jewish scriptures (which includes the first five books of our Bible) were reintroduced to the people, and their religion was reformed and restored. Think about it: the Jews have been without their scriptures for nearly one hundred fifty years; that's nearly eight generations.

But that's where we find ourselves in today's reading from Nehemiah. Ezra has begun the process of reintroducing the Jews to their scriptures, and he reads aloud from the scrolls for nearly six straight hours. However, the ancient written language was becoming unfamiliar to the people, so Ezra was assisted by the Levites (those Jews who had been given responsibility over the Temple, and over religious ceremonies) who, working with groups of people, helped them interpret and understand their holy writings.

And when the people hear the words that Ezra is reading — that is, when they finally realize that they have regained their long-lost legacy from Moses — they weep and fall on their faces to worship God. But Ezra reminds the people that this is a holy day, and that they should be celebrating with joy, and share what they have with those who have nothing. And that's what they do; they've heard the words of scripture, they have been helped to understand those words, and they have acted on those words.

The reading from Luke describes an event that takes place four hundred years later. And even though so much time has passed, the people still gather together to hear readings from their scriptures, and to hear a rabbi interpret the words for the people. In today's reading, Jesus, fresh from his baptism and forty-day sojourn in the desert, reads and interprets the words of scripture

for the people who have gathered in the synagogue. But even as he begins to read, Jesus is only too aware that his audience can remember him as a boy, and are still acquainted with the members of his family. In other words, this is no special guest speaker; he's just one of the boys. Nevertheless, and with the assurance of a prophet, Jesus reads a passage 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.*

That's the reading. And for an interpretation, Jesus offers a sermon that is probably the perfect length: one sentence. He says: "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." With this, he has declared that his mission is to minister to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed; words which describe very nicely the people of Nazareth. It must have been an exciting moment. And at first, the people are complimentary: "Didn't he do well? And he's one of our own."

But as time will show, Jesus is not in the habit of flattering people and telling them what they want to hear; in fact, he often challenges their closest-held beliefs. For example, on one occasion he told his Jewish audience that they were not the only ones chosen by God, and that one of their ancient prophets even ignored the needs of Jews in order to minister to foreigners, who, though not of the house of Judah, were people of faith nonetheless. And because people didn't usually like this turn in the lesson, their support of Jesus turned to suspicion and doubt.

So, what do we make of these two readings? Well, living in a time when so much of the controversy within our church centers around the subject of biblical interpretation, these readings challenge us to *listen with understanding* what the words of scripture are truly saying to us. And they remind us that, when people turn to the Bible as a source of ultimate truth, but don't have any real understanding of what's being said or how it was recorded, or knowledge of who wrote the various books and what was going on when they were writing, or even any awareness of the context of each story, they do no honor to our sacred writings. And I believe that people who simply fall back upon what they describe as a "plain reading of scripture," and refuse to consider alternate interpretations, are often guilty of lazy scholarship and poor hermeneutics. For the purpose of scripture is not to enslave us to a bunch of words written on pages of paper, but to liberate us with its vision of a new kingdom of God on earth. And these readings will very often challenge our own long-held assumptions about scripture and the Christian life.

The reading from Nehemiah issues to us a powerful call to listen to scripture with understanding. And the message of Jesus is that, not only is *his* mission to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed, but that this is *our* mission as well. And if, in the fulfilling of that mission, we find that our long-held assumptions are being called into question by this reading or that

interpretation, our challenge is not to rebel, or break away, or walk apart, as so many have already done. Rather, our challenge is to seek to understand.

Several years ago, I was conducting bible study, and someone took exception to my interpretation of a particular passage of scripture. And in their objection, they compared my lesson to a particular Charlie Chaplin skit, where the little hobo pulls at a small thread sticking out from the hem of his trousers. As he begins to pull and pull at that little thread, his pants begin to unravel until he is left with no trousers at all. And their point was, if we challenge this story or that interpretation with something new, what will we have left? And my response was, “Hopefully, and if our inquiry is guided by the Spirit, what we’ll be left with is the truth.”

Socrates once said, “You can understand when children are afraid of the dark. But it is a tragedy when adults are afraid of the light.” Sometimes, listening with understanding, and facing the light of scriptural truth, is frightening, because it threatens to upset the applecart of our carefully constructed theological frameworks. But wouldn’t it be nice if the Christians around the world could spend this particular season of Epiphany focusing our energies on our mission and ministry to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed, instead of arguing about the interpretation of certain biblical passages? I think so, and I believe God thinks so as well.

Let us pray: Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.