

**Third Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**Father Mike Holloran**  
**January 27, 2019, Year C**

When Jesus got up in front of the synagogue in Nazareth and opened a scroll to read the Scriptures, he was well-received. The Gospel of Luke goes on to tell us, “all spoke highly of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”

When Ezra got up in front of an outdoor assembly in Jerusalem and opened a scroll to read the Scriptures, it didn't go so well. In fact, people were weeping as they heard the words of the law.

Why the different reactions? It had everything to do with what they thought they were hearing.

At Nazareth, Jesus said he was fulfilling the ancient prophecy of Isaiah: glad tidings to the poor, liberty to captives, the oppressed go free. What's not to like about that? Especially when your country is occupied by a foreign army and high taxes are driving you to the poor house. The people were in a mood to be freed from all that. Jesus was the one to do it? Those are some gracious words!

But the fulfillment the people were wanting, in the political realm, had already happened, when the Jews kept captive in Babylonia were allowed to return to Judea. Cyrus, the King of Persia, had conquered the Babylonians and found all over their territory people who had been brought there unwillingly by Nebuchadnezzar years before. Why not let them all go home and rebuild Jerusalem? It would turn a potential problem-- groups of resentful people all over his empire-- into a potential asset-- one unified community of grateful people near the border of a constantly resentful Egypt.

And the exiles thought “Free at last!” It was like their ancestors being freed from Egypt at the time of Moses. So, the Jews began to make the trek back to Judea, group by group, over a period of years. But life was not so easy for the returning exiles. Jerusalem was a ruin, the temple a wreck, the people who had migrated into Judea during their absence were not all that welcoming, and what welcome there was wore out quick. There was even weird weather and crop failures.

So, the returnees were disillusioned. They had been freed from Babylon, but for what? The service of Yahweh presumably, but they were not noticing any great benefit from serving Yahweh. So, they put God and His covenant on the back burner and forgot who they were as they intermarried with the pagan locals and eked out what joy they could get exploiting and abusing each other.

Their freedom from the Babylonians was turning into an every-man-for-himself free for all. The bonds of oppression had not been replaced by the bonds of community, and so they found themselves slaves again, now to their own selfishness. But they would not have admitted it. “Are you happy?” “I’ll be happier once I cheat my neighbor out of his vineyard!

Freedom from, but for what? That was still an open question when Ezra arrived from his exile in Babylonia. He not only had in his possession the scroll of the Books of Moses-- Genesis through Deuteronomy--but he knew how to interpret them, and how to apply them, and, most important of all, he had royal authority from the King of Persia to enforce them as the law of the land in the province of Judea. Ezra summoned them all -- men, women, and children old enough to understand-- and he mounted the platform at one end of the open place that was before the Water Gate, and he read to them out of those scrolls from daybreak until midday, and the people... wept.

They wept because they had been deceived by a pipe dream freedom. They equated freedom with mere lack of external constraints-- religious rules, social obligations, the rule of law. They thought freedom meant no rules, the indulgence of every desire, the absolute right to one's own life without regard for other people. “I gotta be me, too bad for you.”

But if freedom from external constraints is not accompanied by an internal freedom from selfishness for community, it is loveless, lifeless, sterile. Freedom that does not find its true spiritual purpose becomes a prison.

I'm reminded of the closing lines of a poem by W.H. Auden entitled “In Memory of William Butler Yeats”. It was written in February 1939, when everyone could smell World War Two coming. One line refers to a poet. Think of Jesus Christ as that poet.

In the nightmare of the dark / All the dogs of Europe bark,  
And the living countries wait, / Each sequestered in its hate.

Intellectual disgrace / Stares from every human face,  
And the seas of pity lie / Locked and frozen in each eye.

Follow, poet, follow right / To the bottom of the night,  
With your unconstraining voice / Still persuade us to rejoice;

In the deserts of the heart / Let the healing fountain start,  
In the prison of his days / Teach the free man how to praise.

Freedom, if it is isolated from community, demanding its own rights at the expense of others, obsessed with its own plans and pleasures, becomes a prison. Christ came to free us from that prison. He is the poet persuading us to rejoice in those blessings that can only be received with humble simplicity. He is the spiritual liberator teaching us how to praise-- how to acknowledge the value and beauty of what is with gratitude to the Creator.

People who rejoice and offer praise do not make war on one another. Their hearts are freed from the prison of their days, freed for love of God and neighbor. Thus, is the prophecy of Isaiah, and the longing of every human heart, fulfilled through Christ Jesus our Lord.