

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

Sunday January 24, 2010

Epiphany 3C 2010

(Sermon delivered from notes – this is a recreation):

In the name of our one living, ever-creating, ever-loving, ever-sustaining God:
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

All three of our readings today are about new beginnings and the creative tension that surrounds such beginnings. It seems people today want things in simple sound bites. We seem to respond to easy answers with no complications. It is hard to talk about the realities of an imperfect world in the context where people don't want nuances and complexity. Even the best newspapers are reducing the length of their news articles because we no longer have the patience to read long articles.

But we do live in an imperfect and complex world. Sometimes we not only have to choose between good and bad but make the difficult decision between two goods.

Our reading today from the Hebrew Scriptures focus on the Law and the development of the Jewish identity as a people of the Covenant. The books of Nehemiah and Ezra (maybe once one book) are about the return of the captives from the Babylonian Captivity to a destroyed Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple and the walls. It is really also a metaphor for the rebuilding of a society and culture and the establishment of a national identity. These things are important and necessary. We all need an identity of who we are. When this identity gets confused, we get anxious.

In today's reading Ezra the priest and scribe is on a tower on a plain with all the people surrounding them. When he and Nehemiah and their fellow captives returned, they found those left behind who had married local woman and had families for three generations separate from

those returning. The Law (largely refined in Babylon) was being read to all in public assembly for public assent. They were told to rid themselves of foreign ways – even sending away into the desert their foreign wives and the children born to them.

This really is the founding event of Judaism where they became a ‘people of the scroll.’ The public reading and assent was a covenant wherein all accepted a founding lore, common rituals, clothing and dietary habits and a deep memory of a common history as related in common Scripture. This identity was needed to provide the cohesiveness for them to survive in a hostile environment where they were outnumbered.

Psalm 19 celebrates the Torah as making the world and daily life go around in as orderly, predictable and beautiful fashion as the rising sun and the moon’s cycles. This is what many people are missing today. Order and predictability and common rituals are good things.

But there can be a dark side to this: the danger of parochialism, viewing the world as “us versus them”, seeing “others” as outside threats and “our way” as not only the best way but the only way.

Our Gospel lesson introduces another new beginning when Jesus shows up in the synagogue in his old hometown of Nazareth. He is returning, “filled with the Spirit” following his Baptism in the Jordan. He has preached and done wonders in Galilee and his reputation precedes him to Nazareth. It is a small town – 200 or so people who have lived there for generations. No secrets there! It is kind of like Lahaina to the 10th power.

Jesus is handed the scroll to read with the day’s lesson. It is the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah and Jesus pauses to find the sections he is looking for:

“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.”

These are from Isaiah 61:1-2 and 58:6. Now all eyes are on Jesus as he sits to give the ex-

pected commentary. Here Jesus gives the shortest sermon ever: “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” He proclaims himself as the sermon – the Word made flesh and present in the world.

This is Jesus’ keynote address – his basic statement of identity and mission. It is the core of his stump speech about what his ministry is all about - to bring the kingdom of God (the way God would have things) into being on Earth. Good news to the poor; release of captives (slaves and those in debtors’ prison); sight to the blinded; freedom for the oppressed. Jesus compares his arrival to the Year of the Lord – the Jubilee Year that in Leviticus comes every 50 years when all debts are forgiven, all lands returned to their original owners and everybody starts anew.

Significantly, Jesus chose NOT to make a portion of Isaiah 61:2 part of his mission statement – the part that reads: “and to proclaim the day of the Lord’s vengeance.” Jesus wasn’t about vengeance but about restoration. He wasn’t about punishment but about transformation through repentance.

There we have it – Jesus’ mission statement and ours. He reminds us that God created all and owns all. God’s ways and economy supersede ours.

Note this tension between the comforting confines of the Law and the liberating and demanding Spirit active in a world that is always changing and challenging us. God tells us that those on the fringe are as much a part of God’s love in creation as everyone else.

Paul in the Corinthians 12 deals with this conflict and discomfort. Does anyone know what Corinth was? Well, it was a new city built by the Romans in southern Greece and ideally situated for trade in this huge Empire. It was the Wild West – like California in the Gold Rush. All kinds of people came for all over and everyone was on the make. He finds God’s spirit active in this new world and declares Jesus’ mission and discipleship open to all. But now the tricky part – How to get them to get along? We still struggle with that.

He uses the metaphor of the human body – unity out of diversity! Yes, all are different

and, no, not all are equal, but all are needed. Each has a special purpose and brings his or her own gifts, knowledge and stories to enrich the entire community.

The Church – and I mean that in the broadest sense – should think hard about these lessons. Too often we seemed trapped into parochialism and have a tough time with Paul’s idea of unity out of diversity. We have buildings and budgets and traditions and programs. But are we a people of compassion? Do we see and value the gifts those different from have and could bring to us? Do we follow Christ in seeking healing for all? Or do we declare the vengeance of the Lord instead? Do we invite or do we reject?

These are things I think our readings invite us to consider. Our Gospel lesson is our plumb line.

Amen.