

**Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C**  
**(Jan. 25, 2004)**

We have a more than usually interesting situation in our readings today. Both the first and third readings take us right to the heart of Jewish worship. In the first reading we hear the prophet Ezra, standing before the assembled congregation and presenting to them the book of the law. This book had been lost with the destruction of the temple and was recently rediscovered when they began cleaning away the rubble to begin building a new temple. With that new temple the people would also begin to build a new life, and what better way to start than by listening in prayer to what God had asked them to do? The people stood in the typical Jewish attitude of prayer with arms held high and then when the reading was ended they prostrated themselves on the ground before the Lord and pledged to carry out all that the Lord required of them.

In the Gospel passage we find ourselves part of a typical Jewish synagogue service. Jesus is not only the lector for the day but he is also the homilist. He reads from the prophet Isaiah. The people sit and listen. He then gives his interpretation of what they have heard and the people respond.

What happened in that ancient Jewish assembly and what happened in the synagogue in Nazareth are not very different from what happens in our Liturgy of the Word. The same pattern is at the heart of our worship: the word is proclaimed and interpreted in an assembly. And during those two actions it is listened to, clung to, and savored. An author I read recently put it this way:

We come to the moment when the assembly sits and the reader stands with the book open. It happens each Sunday, but it should still be, each time, a moment of delight for us. Wherever we come from that morning, whatever the troubles, whatever the aches and pains, whatever the worries, whatever the preoccupations, somehow they all get caught up into the troubles, aches and pains, delights and preoccupations that are sitting beside and behind and around each one of us. The church is filled with such things.

And it is a church about to listen to its book. What kind of a church is going to listen well to its book? One with no worries? Or one full of the struggles of everyday life? The truth is this: we who come here are hungry individuals, needy people, and when we are all together, we are a hungry church. The words of this book are our food and drink. We sit down and the reader opens the book, and the church is nourished.

How is the congregation nourished in that synagogue in Nazareth? Jesus is full of the spirit. He stands in continuity with the past by reading from Isaiah, and he gives the people assurance that God has been faithful to God's promises, that in him what the prophet had said hundreds of years before has come to pass. His mission, his program, his vocation will be to do what the prophet says: bring good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to captives, give sight to the blind, release prisoners, announce a year of favor from the Lord. A year of favor is the Jubilee year when debts were forgiven, enemies were reconciled, and there was a new start for everyone. His words were words of encouragement for the people, words of compassion, of understanding, of love. And of course he did not just talk about it. He went out and did it.

In the second reading Paul tells us that we are the body of Christ. Now that is not just a fanciful image. It is the expression of a reality. We are all united as one body with Christ as our head. And just as in the body what affects one member affects all, so, too, with us. If I break my leg or have a heart attack, my whole body's functioning is impaired. So, too, if something bad happens to one of us, it happens to all of us and if something good happens to one of us it happens to all of us.

And since we are the body of Christ those actions that we heard in the Gospel and which describe Christ's mission, describe us as well. That should make us pause and ponder – ponder: how do we as a local church embody those aspects of Jesus' ministry? How do we experience our actions as grounded in the Spirit? How well do we understand the history of the Jewish people as our heritage, too? How does our mission in terms of where we spend our time, energy and money, extend beyond the walls of our church? How would we act if we saw ourselves as Luke has Jesus do, as the fulfillment of God's promises to the world because if we are the body of Christ, that is what we are, the fulfillment of God's promises to the world.

How then, concretely, practically speaking can we be the fulfillment of God's promises to the world? When as mothers and fathers we raise our children with love, giving them good example and teaching them to love one another and to spread that love beyond the family, we are the fulfillment of God's promises to the world.

When we welcome strangers and make them feel comfortable and at home in our midst, we are the fulfillment of God's promises to the world.

When we give food and clothing to the hungry and homeless who come to us for help, when we offer them words of encouragement and hope and aid them in the difficult task of getting their lives in order, we are the fulfillment of God's promises to the world.

St. Augustine has a beautiful passage which links what we are contemplating here with what will follow: the celebration of the Eucharist. He says: If therefore you are the body of Christ and his members, your mystery has been placed on the Lord's table. You receive your mystery in Holy Communion. You reply "Amen" to that which you are, and by giving you consent. For you hear, "The body of Christ," and you reply, "Amen." Be a member of the body of Christ, says St. Augustine, so that your "Amen" may be true.