

January 23, 2022 - 3rd Sunday after Epiphany - Reflection

Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

“Today This Scripture is Fulfilled”

We are often encouraged by those who look out for our mental health to do what we can to ‘live in the moment’ which sounds very similar to Jesus’ instruction about not worrying. We hear this instruction also from those who have devoted their lives to service in a monastery or convent. Attending to what is right in front of you is a very healthy way to meet the day to day challenges according to these experts. I have found this a very useful, if difficult, piece of advice because when I do manage to do it my life seems to be at greater peace. Living in the moment is important but, as with many bits of good advice, there are some things to remember while we are living in the moment. The first is that even though we are encouraged to pay attention to what is going on around us rather than living in the past or worrying about the future this present moment is attached to both the past and the future. We wouldn’t be where we are without the past and we have the opportunity to shape our future so living in the moment does not ask us to ignore history or consequences. The second thing to point out is that focusing on the moment can sometimes cause us to ignore the human connections in which we live and that is certainly not its intention either. Again we wouldn’t be where we are without our relationships and the future will include those relationships in one form or another. I mention these things in part because of the scripture passage in Luke’s Gospel which is this week’s reading.

Jesus ended the reading given to him in the synagogue with the words, ‘today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing’. He had just read what we know as the 61st Chapter of the book of Isaiah which speaks to its readers of one who would be anointed by God. In that moment in time, in the Nazareth synagogue, something significant happened and we are meant pay close attention to the meaning and importance in the message. Like all moments there was a past and a future attached to Jesus’ statement. The past had to do with the setting in which Isaiah first wrote the words that Jesus used as his text. As you read through the book of Isaiah you find that it seems to be written in three parts. In the latter part of the book of Isaiah the chapters deal mostly with the coming Messiah. These chapters can be a bit confusing to read because sometimes it sounds like the writer is speaking to all Israel while other times the text seems to refer to an individual. Scholars have concluded that both are true and that in Jesus the union between Messiah and Israel is seen in the flesh. The words that Jesus quoted predicted someone coming who would have the Spirit of the Lord’s anointing to preach good news to the poor Those who study the history of God and God’s people point out that the entire nation of Israel had been given the task of proclaiming the Good News of God but a time would come, Isaiah was inspired to write, when a single individual would be set apart by God’s anointing to fulfill the role. So the moment in time in that synagogue in Nazareth was part of the long history of the nation of Israel in their role as the people of God. The outpouring of the Spirit upon Jesus marked him as the

coming Messiah which meant some changes to come in the future.

The familiar verses from Isaiah 61 are speaking of one person so it would be easy to conclude that the Messiah is like a super hero who would come and do all the work on behalf of humanity in order to set things right so we can all relax as the job is done for us. Indeed Jesus did work that only he could do on behalf of everyone but as I look at his life and ministry I seem him intimately connected with the people who came to be his disciples. Only Jesus was able to perform the sacrifice that eliminated the power of sin and death but he also called upon all people to follow and obey. The singular pronoun in the passage does not exclude the possibility of a community and we know by watching Jesus work that he assembled a group of apprentices as one of the first acts in his ministry. The moment in time at that Nazareth synagogue included everyone present for worship on that day which meant the first disciples of Jesus as well. The promise from Isaiah was that God would send a Messiah would cause the process of God's salvation to move forward and we have witnessed that truth in the stories of Jesus and, I hope, experienced the effects of it on a personal level as well.. In order to accomplish his work we know that Jesus went to the cross and was raised to life but he also assembled a team of people who were to become the people to carry on the work. The cornerstone was Jesus and the foundation was the prophets and apostles but the building would be made up of people from future generations who were motivated by the Spirit to work for God's common good. Years after the event we heard described in Luke's Gospel a man named Saul of Tarsus, also known as St. Paul, was one of those who assisted in the work and he had something very important to say to his friends in Corinth who were struggling to understand what it meant to their everyday lives that the Messiah had come.

In this portion of his first letter to the Corinthians Paul is trying to explain the very important concept of a group working together for God's purposes. In the first half of the chapter he suggests that we all have particular gifts to contribute to the common good and in the second half he speaks about the inter-personal relationships and how they are to work. He outlines two major mistakes that happen in almost every congregation among certain individuals. In almost all groups there will be people who do not recognize the value of their gift because they are jealous of someone else's gift or there will be people who wish everyone to be the same as they are. "If the foot would say, 'because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body" is the first mistake while "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'" is the second mistake. One of the most important things Jesus the Messiah does through the Holy Spirit is to form a community out of diverse and different people. Forming such a community is done while preserving the individuality of each and every member and honouring the particular gift each has received from God. This work needs the cooperation of every member in honouring their own gifts and accepting the differences in others because the work of God's salvation involves everyone - not just those like us. The common good of

God's work in this world involves the work of the Messiah as well as the work of Messiah's people who are living in the moment while rejoicing over the gifts of the past and looking with hope into the future.

Living in the moment also respects this reality because all of our moments are part of a much larger thing than just what is going on at this particular time. I believe that keeping these two things at the front of our minds helps us to stay focussed on the task of cooperating with Jesus work of 'proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour'.

So, what does it mean to live in the moment that has been impacted by the arrival of the Messiah and the continued presence of God's Holy Spirit? One of the things it means is to be open to hearing the message that we are loved and precious to the God who made us just as we are. God given gifts are indeed part of our lives whether we accept that or not. Acknowledging those gifts and learning to use them for God's purposes makes up a large portion of the life we live. Working our way through the doubts about our ability and finding that place of humility and acceptance takes a community. We begin with insecurities and self-centred motivations and the Holy Spirit works in us and through us to transform those unhelpful portions of our lives into useful and productive portions. Truly living in the moment involves a clear vision of the truth that we are 'beautifully and wondrously made' and that we are 'sinners in need of redeeming'. We are important but not more important than the person sitting next to us or the person down the road. What the proclamation of the Good News to the poor etc did was open the door for true human maturity and the guide for that journey is God's Holy Spirit. Many other people in our past have worked out ways of growing in this ability such as Brother Lawrence who wrote a short book called "Practicing the Presence of God".

As we continue to journey with Jesus through these pandemic influenced days may we be able to 'seize the day' and use the gifts we have been given by God while rejoicing in every companion we have on the journey and their particular gifts.

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