

Reflection

First Sunday of Lent, March 10, 2019

A story is told from the rabbinical lore of the Jewish faith. A wise rabbi wished to have a glimpse of how people thought of themselves. He decided to ask three men a question. He called to one man and asked him, "If you found a purse of gold coins, what would you do with it?" "I would look for the owner and give it back," he replied. "You are a fool," the rabbi exclaimed.

The rabbi asked a second man, who answered, "I wouldn't look for the owner. I'd keep it for myself." "You are a scoundrel," said the rabbi.

Then he put the question to the third man. "How can I possibly know, rabbi, what I would do in that situation. Would I be able to conquer the evil urge to keep it? Or would the evil urge overcome me and make me take what belongs to another? I do not know. But if God strengthened me against the evil inclination, I would give the money back to the owner." "You are wise indeed," said the rabbi.

Why did the rabbi call the first man a fool? Because that man did not really understand himself. He presumed he would be strong enough to resist the temptation to keep the money. People don't fall because they are weak. They fall because they think they are strong.

The rabbi called the second man a scoundrel because, without, any qualms of conscience, he was prepared to keep what didn't belong to him. For him, temptation is an opportunity to enrich himself at someone else's expense.

The rabbi praised the third man. What made this man wise was that he knew that he was weak like anyone else. He hoped that when faced with the temptation to keep the money, he would be strong enough to do the right thing. But he knew that to do so, he needed help from God, and was willing to seek that help.

All of us are weak and prone to evil. This may be a disturbing fact. But it is dangerous to ignore it. The problem for most of us is our failure to know ourselves, to recognize the weakness within and to deal with it. But there is a kind of comfort and freedom in knowing and accepting this humbling truth. We have within us conflicting impulses, so that doing good is always possible, but rarely easy.

We may think that it was easy for Jesus to resist temptation. After all, he was the Son of God. We may think he did not feel hunger and was not attracted by earthly power and glory. Being human, he felt the pangs of temptation as we do. The temptations of Jesus are those of every person: To live for material things alone, whether food or drink, money and the fine things it can buy. How many succumb to this. To seek power, authority and control over others for no reason but to make ourselves important. To seek one's own glory and the acclaim of others, instead of worshipping God alone.

Jesus did not overcome the temptations of the devil on his own. Having spent forty days in the desert, he was at his weakest. It was the power of God within him, because of his complete dedication to the will of God. The devil was defeated on this occasion, but would be back, as the gospel says, "at an opportune time." Some of us believe we should reach a stage where we are beyond temptation. Jesus never reached that stage while on earth. Nor did any of the saints.

For us, temptation to sin is an ever-present reality that targets our weaknesses. It can be overcome not by our own efforts but only by the power of God. We must depend not on ourselves, nor anything else on earth, but on God alone.

During this season of Lent, we are called to examine our lives and to understand more deeply the ways that sin enters our lives. When we repent and seek Christ's forgiveness, we acknowledge our weakness and our need to be filled with the power of God. If we worship God alone and serve only him, Jesus is present. Where Jesus is at work, the power of evil cannot reign.

As we spend time with God at this Mass, we are strengthened by the Word that we hear and the Eucharist that we share. Let us always understand that our true strength is not our own, but lies in the power of God within us.

Reflection

Ash Wednesday, March 6, 2019

When something is burned, ashes are all that's left. As Scripture says, they are good only to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. Our ancestors removed the ashes from their wood stoves and threw them onto the ice so they would not slip and fall. As we once again place ashes on our foreheads, they remind us that life is fragile, imperfect, and incomplete. From ancient times, placing ashes on the head have been used as a sign of doing penance.

Once again we begin the familiar journey of Lent. Why? The reason is that we need this Lent and every Lent to remind us that at the heart of our worship is the mystery and God and our relationship with God. The reason we gather for these forty days is that we are a different people from whom we were last year and from whom we will be next year. We are always reaching new and different stages of life's journey to complete union with God. We hear the same stories from the Scriptures, receive the same ashes, make the same gestures, and share in the same Eucharist. Yet we do them differently. The points of intersection of our lives and the activity of God's Spirit change as we change. We always need to be redeemed. What changes each year are those parts of our lives that need to be redeeming. The call of the prophet to gather the assembly is a call for us today to gather once more, to begin anew in the hope we hear in the prophet's words that the Lord will forgive our sins. We need this Lent to turn, to return, and to turn again and again to God.

As we receive these ashes on our foreheads, we profess that we want to follow the Lord more closely. We are sorry for our sins and want to be better disciples of Christ. We are confident that the Lord is merciful, for the Son came to redeem us and to reconcile us with God.

May the ashes we use and the symbols around us in this season of Lent be signs of our sincere repentance for our sins and of our desire to follow Jesus more faithfully, and to serve God more fervently .

Reflection

Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, March 3, 2019

There is a saying that we should do as we say and say as we do. What we say and the way we behave should be consistent. It is the essence of sincerity.

The brief first reading we hear today draws from the many proverbs and wise sayings found in the Hebrew or Old Testament. Much of the nature of a person is revealed by what they say. One's goodness or one's faults will be revealed, even if they try to conceal them.

Jesus in the gospel told his disciples to be slow to judge others. How easy it is to see another's faults, the speck in their eye. Our own faults are equally evident to others, but not so to us. We are often blind to our own. This is what Jesus calls the log in our own eye.

Jesus taught his disciples during his time with them. He teaches us, his disciples today. We too are called to grow in doing God's will more fervently in our daily lives. And we are called to listen to Christ more attentively and to follow him more faithfully.

This week we begin the season of Lent. We are called to examine our lives and to be aware of our sins and shortcomings. This is a season to examine our lives more carefully through prayer and reflection so that we can see the logs in our own eyes.

We are called to fasting. Traditionally, this is a call to eat, drink and consume less. But today, we are called also to do with less because we often acquire or consume more than we really need. We should also fast from criticism and judgment of others. Fasting helps us to turn away from getting more things to serving God. Doing with less means we have more to share with those in need and place less stress on the earth's resources.

We are called to works of mercy, to be more aware of the needs of others, and to share what we have with them. This can be from our financial resources, or our time and efforts. Especially, we can develop in our lives an attitude of sharing what we have. Throughout Canada, Catholics are invited to give financial support to Development and Peace which is engaged in support of people in various parts of the world.

We should seek to be honest and sincere, to have integrity before God and others. Lent is a time when we can grow through our efforts and God's grace. We want to grow and be better than we are. Lent comes to us every year. Growth in holiness is a lifetime effort. We should never give up the effort. We must shape our inner thoughts to be in accord with what we know to be good. Trying to speak and behave in ways that express the integrity we wish to have will help us to be that person. It calls for practice every day. Lent is a time to renew this effort.

Jesus said that a good tree bears good fruit and a bad tree bears bad fruit. We are called to bear good fruit. Through prayer, fasting and works of mercy, we will grow into the disciples that Christ commands us to be.

Reflection

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, February 24, 2019

Several years ago, there was a woman in Northern Ireland whose husband was shot dead while driving the family to Mass. Soon after the tragedy, she was praying with the children when her young son asked, "Mommy, will the men who killed Daddy go to heaven?"

After breathing a silent prayer, the mother replied, "If they are really sorry and ask Jesus to forgive them, then they will go to heaven." Her son replied, "Well, if they are going to be then, I don't want to be in heaven with them." The mother thought about this for a while, then replied, "If Jesus forgives and saves them, setting them free from their terrible sin, he will change them. They will be completely different people." Her son paused, then said, "Mommy, let's pray for these men and ask Jesus to save them."

Jesus challenges us to respond to darkness with light, to respond to what is worst in another with what is best in us. Most of us think that we have done our Christian duty if we refrain from doing harm to others, even to those who hate us. But Jesus asks more of us. He asks us to love our enemies. Even though this is extremely hard, that mother in Northern Ireland shows us it can be done. So does the youthful David in the first reading.

The gospel tells us how God deals with all of us. We are loved by God, even when we do not love God in return, or if our love is weak. God is generous to us, though we have little to give in return. God forgives us, no matter how great our sin.

Jesus asks us to behave towards others as God behaves towards us. Our reaction is likely to view what he says as idealistic, and impractical in the real world. But human experience shows that evil can be stopped only by those who humbly absorb it, without passing it on. Revenge and retaliation add only darkness to darkness. By adopting a vindictive attitude, we become poisoned by hatred. We use up a great deal of energy in hating. It may satisfy one's rage, but it leaves the heart empty.

When Jesus says, "Forgive your enemies," it is not for the sake of the enemy, but for the sake of oneself. Love releases extraordinary energies within us. The power of love is greater than the power of evil. Still, one of the most difficult things to do is to love someone who hates you. Yet true love is love of the difficult and of the unlovable. Mercy is stronger and more God-like than vengeance.

In the book "Les Miserables", made into a very popular musical of the same name, the convict on the run, Jean Valjean is given hospitality for the night at the home of a bishop who does not know who he is. During the night, the man quietly leaves the house, taking with him two valuable silver candlesticks from the table. Soon he is apprehended by the police and brought back with the candlesticks. The bishop is told his identity. To the surprise of the police, and especially of Jean Valjean, the bishop announces that he had made a gift of them to him before he left. The convict, no longer free, is completely changed by this unexpected expression of love from someone he knows he can never repay. Though returned to prison, he completely loses all the bitterness he had towards those who relentlessly pursued him. He was changed by love.

Someone once said that you don't have to like people to love them. Those who engage in behaviour that is hurtful to others are hard to like. And we can and must protect ourselves without being hurtful. We might confront them in a respectful way and express how we feel and ask them to change their behaviour. To love one another means that we forgive the wrong they have done to us. We do not seek to hurt them nor encourage others to do so. This releases us from the burden of hate. And we might express our lack of hate for them and our desire for what is truly best for them.

Forgiveness is never easy. Resentments may smoulder for a long time. Prayer is the only answer. In the "Our Father", we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us..." We ask for the grace to forgive, knowing that the God against whom we have sinned forgives us and forgets our sins, never even keeping them in memory. As Christ's disciples, we are called to grow into the image and likeness of Christ. When we were baptized, we "put on" Christ. We cannot forgive by our own efforts alone. We can do so only with God's grace. Today we open our lives to the Word of God that we have heard and receive Christ in the Holy Eucharist. May the Spirit of God fill the hearts of everyone with peace and turn us to one another in love.

Reflection

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, February 17, 2019

Long before the time of Christ, the ancient Greeks told the story of King Midas, who loved gold and hoarded it in his palace. To his joy, he received the gift that everything he touched turned to gold. The floor he walked on and the walls he touched turned to gold. Objects of metal and wood he turned to gold. Everything in his home he touched. He was delighted as he thought of his wealth increasing. He would soon be the richest man in the world. But to his dismay, this happened with the people he touched. His wife and daughter turned to gold as soon as he touched them. This gift was not so wonderful after all. It was instead a lesson to avoid greed and avarice.

In ancient times, very few were considered rich. Most people lived off what they could grow on the land or make with their hands. In good years, they had enough for themselves and their families. When harvests failed, they had little, and sometimes faced starvation. Most believed that wealth and power were signs of God's favour. Poverty and misfortune were viewed as a punishment. Such is the way of the world, most people believed in those days. The rich did not see that they had any responsibility for the poor, although they might occasionally throw them a few coins. The prophets of Israel constantly criticized the rich in their country for ignoring the poor and for exploiting the poor to increase their riches. This was one of the reasons that prophets like Jeremiah were often ignored and persecuted.

In the first reading we hear today, the rulers of Israel are faced with a difficult choice. They are faced with invasion from a powerful enemy. The rulers debate whether to prepare a strong defence or to seek help from Egypt. The prophet Jeremiah urges them to trust in the Lord alone. If they rely on people and human efforts alone, their nation would be like a withering shrub in the desert. If they trusted in the Lord, they would be like a tree planted by the water. This was a test of their faith. Would they trust in God alone? God would not let them be destroyed if they turned to God in their need.

In today's gospel reading, we hear Jesus speaking to the crowd about a new way of looking at the world. It was not the wealthy and powerful whom God favours, but the poor, the hungry, the bereaved, the weak. The powerful of the world might not come to their aid. But God would. God sides with the poor, the hungry and the rejected. Jesus criticized the wealthy and the powerful for putting their faith and trust only in themselves. And they did nothing for the poor. Jesus says that the poor, the hungry, the bereaved and the persecuted are loved by God. Because of their weakness and of their deprivation, they are ready to trust in God. Jesus teaches them to believe that God will come to them and respond to their needs with love, comfort and strength. Jesus reached out to those in need. He cured illness and infirmity. He spent time with those on the margins of society. They experienced the love of God in the presence of Jesus.

The material things of this world are given us to meet our needs, and to use wisely. They are signs of God's love, not of special favour. To be deprived of material things, or of health and strength, is not a sign of God's disfavour. We who follow Christ today are called to trust in God alone. Jesus found a ready response among the poor because they understood how precarious life for them was. The rich were preoccupied with managing what they had, keeping it and adding to it. They found it harder to rely on God because they relied on themselves and on what they had.

God is always present in our lives, whether we are rich or poor, healthy or ill. Trusting only in our own strength and ability is to trust in weakness. Trusting in God who created us opens our lives to the love and strength that God offers everyone in abundance. Whether we are poor, rich or middle class, we can live a life of faith with a sense of dependence on God. We shall experience in our daily lives the presence of God and be surprised by the blessings that come to us. We will gladly share our gifts with those who need them. It is neither poverty nor wealth that promises blessing or curse but commitment to Christ despite poverty or wealth.

Those who believe in the risen Lord and live as he taught will experience fullness of life that will never end. They will be like the tree planted beside the water, always nourished and prosperous. The tree does not live on its own but on the water drawn into its roots. Those who are poor, hungry, bereaved or persecuted, are rich because they have Christ in their lives. We do not need to have the Midas touch. Waiting in faith and trust on the Lord, we shall be surprised by the wonderful things that God will do.

Reflection

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, February 10, 2019

The phrase “Damascus experience” has passed into the English language. Most people know what it means. Somebody suddenly starts to behave differently. Perhaps he or she has a commitment not seen before. Perhaps they change their way of life. People know only that something must have happened.

The setting for the first reading is the temple at Jerusalem. Isaiah the priest is at prayer. He has a vision of God. Isaiah is fearful because he is a “man of unclean lips” among a nation of sinners. His lips are purified when one of the angels touched them with a burning coal, and his sins are blotted out. Isaiah heard the Lord say, “Whom shall I send?” Isaiah responded, “Here am I; send me.” He is changed by his encounter with God and became a prophet to Israel.

In the second reading, Paul stated the core of his preaching: that Jesus, who died and rose again, now lives. This was preached by those to whom Jesus appeared after his resurrection, the last of them having been Paul himself. Paul had persecuted Christians but was completely changed by his vision of Jesus. He spent the rest of his life preaching Christ, especially to the Gentiles. Paul acknowledged that he was unfit to be called an Apostle, because he had persecuted the Church. It was only through the grace of God that he could have been an Apostle. Many came to believe in Christ because they heard Paul. This response Paul attributed to the grace of God, not to his own eloquence or hard work.

The gospel reading describes the call of Peter, James and John to be disciples of Jesus. The scene begins with Jesus preaching to a crowd at the seashore. The fishermen are in their boats washing their nets. Jesus got into a boat belonging to Simon (whom Jesus later re-named Peter) to speak to the crowd. He is seated, the usual posture of a teacher in Israel. When he had finished, Jesus told Simon to put out his nets into the deep water for a catch. The fishermen had worked all night and caught nothing, but they agree to put out the nets again. Very quickly, the nets are filled with fish. Simon immediately understood the miraculous nature of what had happened. He was in the presence of the divine. Like Isaiah, he was fearful, “... I am a sinful man.” He was told not to be afraid. Simon the sinner is now among those saved by Jesus. From then on, the fishermen would be catching people. Fear turned to fascination. Simon and the others were attracted to this man. They were changed dramatically by the experience. They left everything and followed Jesus.

Today’s readings are about the call to speak the word of God to others. Isaiah became a prophet to Israel. Peter, James and John became disciples of Jesus and were later called apostles (those who were sent). Paul had a special vision of Jesus and became the missionary to the Gentiles. Each of them responded to the call and said “yes” to God. But the response came only after a life-changing encounter with God. Each felt at first that he was a sinner, but then had a deep experience of being forgiven and cleansed. The first disciples felt such a deep trust that they could leave behind their possessions. They were then free to follow Jesus.

We too encounter Christ in our lives as did people of his time on earth. It may not have been astounding like Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. It is more likely that it has been in the routine of daily life. The fishermen that day were astounded by the haul of fish. They realized this had to be the gift of God. We too will have experienced something happen that we knew wasn't of our own doing. Something happens. It is for our benefit. We might think it is a fortunate coincidence or good luck. But we know it must be more than that.

We experience the presence of God in the Word that we hear, in the sacraments and in prayer. It is a wonderful thing to know that Christ loves us even though we may feel unworthy. But Christ always calls us to do something to share the message of salvation. All are called to witness to our faith, that is, to live and worship according to what we have been taught. Christians allow the light of faith to shine before others, not to be better than others but to lead them to Christ. Many are called to do more, to serve the community of faith in some form of ministry or service, or the wider world. Our experience of Jesus impels us to say "yes" to the call. We may believe we do not have what is needed to answer the call. The Spirit gives that to us. We call it the grace of God.

Few are called to something like Peter, Paul and the other apostles. They were called in a special way to spread the gospel. We are called to serve God and one another in various ways, even though we feel unworthy. We are disciples of Christ. We follow him and life-long learners. We encounter Jesus today in the Word that we hear and the Eucharist that we share. We are called and strengthened. Having encountered the living God in Jesus, we can respond freely and joyfully. And we shall continue to be amazed at what the Lord will accomplish through us.

Reflection

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, February 3, 2019

We might expect that Jesus would be welcomed and praised when he returned to Nazareth, where he had grown up. At the synagogue, all were amazed at his knowledge and eloquence. But perhaps he was not readily accepted because he was too familiar. They thought they knew him well because they had seen him grow up there. Soon, they rejected him.

Jesus is the Son of God. Yet he was also a prophet to Israel. There were several prophets in Israel prior to Jesus. Their books are in the Bible. They communicated God's will to the people. Usually it was a warning or a criticism they had to deliver, and the people and their rulers did not want to hear it. They often warned them to change their way of life when they sinned. The prophets called them again and again to trust in God by doing God's will for them. The people often did not want to hear the message and rejected the prophets, and sometimes persecuted them. People then as today find in the word of God a difficult challenge. But God supported the messenger. Jeremiah was told that no matter how strong the opposition was, he would not be overwhelmed. He would be like a pillar of iron, or a wall of bronze. The prophets' words are important for us today, which is why we often hear them in the first reading at Mass.

Jesus too is often referred to in the gospels as a prophet. As we know, he was unique. Not only would he redeem those who believe in him by his suffering and death. He would speak with a unique authority because he is the Christ, the Son of God. It appears that Jesus was rejected that day in Nazareth because he had said God wills that from then on salvation would be offered to all peoples, not to Israel alone. They found this intolerable. After all, they were the Chosen People to whom God had first been revealed.

Jesus referred to the prophets of Israel's past, and he knew well what they had said and done. The word of God was a consistent message, and Jesus built upon the prophets of Israel's past. Jesus too would be rejected as were many of those before him. There were many in Israel who accepted and believed in him. There were others who rejected him and would not believe he was truly speaking the word of God. But his words and deeds would be proclaimed afterwards, by the apostles and others. They would find a ready welcome in the lives of many in Israel and beyond.

Do we have prophets today? Yes we do. We have heard the popes speak about the sanctity of every human life, and the necessity of peace among nations and peoples. We hear Pope Francis tell us that we are one human family and must reach out to the poor and welcome refugee. We must protect the environment in which we live, because it is a gift of God to support life. The words of Pope Francis are addressed to all people of every nation and faith. They are prophetic words for the whole world.

Prophecy takes place not only by the spoken word, but by what is done. When those who profess faith in Jesus care for the poor, feed the hungry, and serve the needs of the world, God's will is revealed in the day to day life of the community. Those who act on God's will proclaim the message by their witness. What is proclaimed by word is shown by our example. We will experience misunderstanding or

rejection. That will test our faith. But we will not be overwhelmed. We do what God has called us to do because of our love for God and for others.

Hearing and accepting the word of God is not always easy. Like the people of ancient Israel, and those who were in the synagogue of Nazareth that day that Jesus spoke, we too might resist the word of God. More often, it is ignored or drowned out by the many things clamouring for our attention today. The word of God challenges us many times throughout life. It challenges us to grow in faith, to trust in God more deeply and to serve more fervently. This is a life-long task, and as we know not an easy one. But God is always with us. At the heart of the message proclaimed by the prophets and by Jesus is the love of God for us. The prophets were discouraged, but never overwhelmed. Jesus died on the cross but rose again and returned to the Father. The love of God sustains us. The grace of God guides and strengthens us.

During these days of Ordinary Time, may we welcome the word of God spoken by Jesus and by the prophets. God continues to speak to us, the people of God today. May we accept the challenges and patiently allow God's grace to shape us. Jesus is always with us. The word of God and the proclamation of the Body of Christ on earth, the Church, continues to guide us. The Eucharist we share today unites us again with Christ and with one another. It is our strength and comfort. The Holy Spirit has been given to us and will remain with us always. May we be comforted by God's abiding love.

Reflection

January 27, 2019 Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Years ago, I knew a man who was well known in his community and the surrounding area for his "recitations." At every concert, he was asked to appear onstage. He would recite from memory "The Smoke Room on the Kyle" or "The Touch of the Master's Hand." These are long poems that many of the listeners knew well or had heard him recite before. Each time he started to recite, the audience hung on every word spoken with every range of tone. The stories told were entertaining, but it was special to hear them recited with feeling, expression and emotion.

We can read words on the printed page and understand the information expressed. When proclaimed with feeling and expression suitable to their meaning, the words resonate in our feelings and emotions as well in our minds.

In ancient times, few people could read and write. They depended only on the spoken word to understand their society and their religion. The first reading describes a gathering of the people of Israel who thirsted to hear the Law given them by God. Ezra, the elderly priest and his assistants read to them, and gave explanations of meaning of what they, so that the people understood. The people wept with joy. They were encouraged in their belief that God loved them and were joyful in the experience of God's love. The people were told, "...the joy of the Lord is your strength." They were reminded again that God was with them and that they were God's chosen people.

Luke, the gospel writer, stated that he was not an eye witness to the events of the life of Christ. His sources were the stories and sayings of Jesus that circulated by word of mouth, some of which had by then been written down. Why did he write another "orderly account"? Perhaps he and others were not satisfied with the earlier ones. He addressed his gospel specifically for a man called Theophilus (meaning "lover of God"), but it is clearly intended for a wide, Gentile audience. The gospel writer and others wanted to preserve what the disciples of Jesus saw and heard, so that this knowledge could be shared with others. The gospels have been passed down through the centuries to us.

The second part of the reading describes Jesus' going to the synagogue at Nazareth, where he had been brought up. It was customary for a man very learned in the Scriptures to read from them and give an explanation, as Ezra the prophet had done long before. Jesus was given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Having read the prophet's words about having been sent to proclaim the good news, Jesus announced, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." God loved the chosen people. God spoke

through their Scriptures. Now the Son of God was among them. The hopes of Israel had now been fulfilled. Isaiah listed signs of God's actions: the good news would be proclaimed to the poor, release to the captives, the blind would recover their sight, the oppressed would be set free. Jesus did all of this during his public ministry. We have a deeper experience of Jesus through the gospels. We hear of his miracles, the words that he spoke, the opposition he met, and his Passion, death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit of God, given to each of us and to the church draws us more deeply into the reality of Jesus when we read or hear the Scriptures. The four gospels each in their own way give an experience of Jesus to those who read or hear them.

The Law and the proclamation of the prophets throughout Israel's history gave the people hope and joy. Paul's letters instructed the early Christian communities and encouraged their faith. The preaching of Jesus brought hope to those who were discouraged, guidance and understanding to those who were searching, release from sin for all who believed and accepted God's love. The gospels were written so that others who had not seen Jesus might know him. The word of God, read and proclaimed, has ever since had a deep impact on those who have encountered it. Christ continues to speak to us, and the Spirit moves us to respond. The good news of salvation continues to be proclaimed to all who thirst. Those held captive by guilt and sin find freedom. The blind who seek guidance will find the light of understanding. Through the inspired word, those who believe will find freedom from sin, the love of God, and the guidance and encouragement of the Spirit.

Reading the word on the printed page encourages thoughtful reflection. And people of faith should read the Scriptures. But there is something special about hearing it proclaimed and hearing it as a community of faith. During these many days of Ordinary Time in the church year, we shall hear the accounts of Jesus proclaimed. As we hear the spoken word together, and welcome it into our lives, the word of God will resonate in our minds and in our hearts so that we are comforted, strengthened and grow in faith. The words of the prophet Isaiah were fulfilled during the public ministry of Jesus. Christ is present among us today, in the words of Scripture and in the Eucharist that we share. The word and its purpose continue to be fulfilled in our hearing.

Reflection

January 20, 2019 Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

A wedding is a joyful occasion for all who take part. It has always been so, and in every culture and nation. The coming of the Messiah to Israel was often described in the Hebrew Scriptures as a wedding banquet. There will be an abundance of good things, symbolized by food and wine. The first reading from Isaiah describes a vision of the coming of the Lord, and of the love to be lavished on the people of Israel. The Lord will delight in the people, as a bridegroom delights in his bride.

The miracle at the wedding at Cana seems to have happened unexpectedly. The wine had run out and Mary informed Jesus, "They have no wine." His reply to his mother sounds insensitive, but he knew that Mary expected him to do something. It suggests also that Jesus was pursuing a plan revealed to him by the Father of which Mary could not have been fully aware. The words she spoke next are surprising, saying to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." They underline her trust in Jesus and in God and present her again as an example of the true believer. She believed he would do something, whether he was prepared or not! Jesus performed no actions, telling the servants to fill the jars with water, and to draw some out and take it to the steward. The steward remarked to the bridegroom, "But you have kept the best wine until now." There is not only an abundance of wine, some 600 litres, but it is of the best quality!

John, in his gospel, referred to what Jesus did as "the first of his signs" which "revealed his glory." John always referred to miracles as "signs," because they revealed the power of God within Jesus. The sign was accomplished by no action on Jesus' part, but only by his will expressed indirectly by his words to the servants. John noted that the disciples "believed in him" because they knew what he had done. The disciples would grow in faith as they followed Jesus. Mary saw her faith confirmed. To the readers of the gospel, John wished to emphasize the importance of doing as Jesus said, as the servants had done, so that God's will would be accomplished. And we must see beyond the wondrous nature of what happened to understand who Jesus really is and respond with greater faith.

The week leading up to the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul on Jan. 25 is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. We pray that the Spirit of God will bring us closer together. And we gather to pray together as well. And we reflect on what we have accomplished together, and what remains to be done. Christians have come a long way from the hatred and bigotry of the past, though it remains in some places. What have we accomplished? We respect one another, and work together in many ways. We believe that all Christian churches and communities seek to serve God and to lead their members to follow Christ more closely. We recognize that just as people are not perfect, our churches and communities can grow and do better.

We work together in serving the world, and especially the poor. Churches in NL take part in the Religious Social Action Committee work with Muslim, Jewish and Hindu communities to seek to end poverty in our province. Christians of many churches work side by side at The Gathering Place and at Emmaus House in the center of St. John's. Bethesda Pentecostal Church supports our parish food bank.

There are many things that still divide us. We must accept the differences in doctrine, belief and practice and continue to respect one another even when we do not agree. We cannot ignore the differences or sweep them away. They are based on long held beliefs and traditions. Yet these differences can lead us to reflect more deeply on our faith, which we often simply take for granted.

The second reading, from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, explains that, among the people of the community, there are many gifts given by the Spirit. All are to be used to serve God and others. Taken together, the members of the Christian community and their diverse gifts complement one another. This is true on the parish level and in the world-wide family of faith. Although there are many gifts, they are given by the one Spirit of God. Christians are called to community, so that the gifts of all may complement one another. For this to happen as Christ wills, his disciples must pray and work together.

Most of the wedding guests, and the couple, must have been unaware of what had taken place. Only Mary and the disciples knew. Later signs in the gospels would be apparent to crowds of people. The changing of the water into wine reminds us that Jesus works in us and in our midst in a way unknown to us except through faith. We have gifts to use to serve the community. They are ours but have been given by the Spirit. God works quietly through each of us. Often people are unaware of what the Spirit is doing, as the wedding guests never realized what Jesus had done.

The body and blood of Jesus are given to us under the appearance of bread and wine. We are nourished as his disciples and guided to do God's will like Mary. We grow in faith as we hear the accounts of Jesus' actions in the gospels. We use our gifts to serve God and one another. We wait for the consummation of our union with God in Jesus, at the wedding banquet of the Lamb in God's kingdom.

Reflection

January 13, 2019 The Baptism of The Lord

The feast of the Baptism of the Lord concludes the Christmas season and begins the period of Ordinary Time in our liturgical calendar. Jesus began his public ministry when he went to be baptized by John. His mission began to unfold after his manifestation that he is Son of God.

John the Baptist was clear and emphatic that he was not the Messiah. He baptized with water, but one more powerful than he would come and baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire - a reference to the coming of the Spirit and the tongues of flame at Pentecost, described in the Acts of the Apostles. The Holy Spirit appeared as a dove, and the voice from heaven occurred after Jesus' baptism while he was at prayer. Throughout this gospel, Jesus is portrayed as experiencing communion with the Holy Spirit during times of prayer. It is unclear whether there were any bystanders, and that they might have seen the dove or heard the voice from heaven. In each of the gospels, these manifestations of God are included to demonstrate that Jesus is the Son of God and that he was beginning his public ministry and the mission for which he was sent by God.

The instructions that Jesus gave to his disciples before he returned to the Father were to preach the gospel to all nations, and to baptize those who accepted it in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We who are baptized belong to Christ and share in the life of God through the Holy Spirit who lives within us. In the early days of the church, parents wished to have their new-born children baptized so that they too could begin to share in the life of grace. In recent times, most parishes celebrate baptism during Mass. This indicates that the newly baptized is joining the community of faith, the Church. In the course of their lives, they will share in the other sacraments that Christ has given to his Church. As we celebrate baptism, we are reminded that we as a parish community have the obligation to support the newly baptized child and his or her family in the life of faith. Especially we model a life of faith by our worship and witness. Each time a baptism is celebrated at Mass, we are reminded of our own baptism, when our parents and god parents brought us to the font of living water and made the profession of faith on our behalf. Baptism is the beginning of a life of faith, and the obligation to serve God. Each celebration we attend reminds us of that.

We begin Ordinary Time with the understanding that God is revealed in Jesus. During Ordinary Time, the Scriptures unfold for us the saving mission of Jesus. The accounts we hear and read of Jesus' words and actions draw us deeply into the mystery of our relationship with God in Christ. Through our baptism, we share in the mission of Jesus Paul described to Titus the lifestyle appropriate for Christians: we are heirs to eternal life, and must live lives that are "self-controlled, upright and godly" while we wait for Jesus to come again. In prayer, we are encouraged and guided by the Spirit. When we praise God in our worship and follow the gospel way of life, we manifest in our own daily lives God's presence in our world. Through our example and witness, others will be drawn to accept the love of God and the redemption offered by Christ Jesus.

Reflection

January 6, 2019 The Epiphany of The Lord

Last year, at Cape Spear, I saw an exhibition of paintings of lighthouses. Each one was quite different from the rest. Beside the picture was a map of the province with a red dot to show where the lighthouse was located. Some are well known like Cape Spear and Cape Race. Others many of may not have heard of. Some are located on points of land, great or small. Some are on rocky, windswept islands. All of them are placed to guide ships and boats through rough and dangerous waters.

It is easy to visualize the beam from a lighthouse on a dark night. From many miles away, the light can be seen at short and regular intervals. And how it attracts the eye amidst the darkness! Even if you are not on storm-tossed boat, but comfortably at home, how fascinating it is to look out a window at night to watch a light shining across the water.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of how a thick darkness covered the peoples of the earth. But, the glory of the Lord would rise upon them and his glory would appear over them. The nations would be drawn to the light. They would come bearing gifts.

The mysterious wise men came from the East seeking the Christ child. Perhaps surprisingly for men, wise or not, they stopped to ask for directions. They persisted until they found Jesus. Their visit has been understood as a sign that Jesus had not come only to Israel, but to all nations. St. Paul writes in our second reading that everyone, Jews and Gentiles, “are sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” Israel would always be God’s chosen people, but the gospel would be made known to the whole world and all would be offered a place in God’s kingdom.

We modern-day Gentiles rejoice that in Christ the light has come into the world. The light of Christ is for us the gospel taught by Jesus. In Christ, we have a window on God. We have learned that our God is loving and wants us all to live forever in the kingdom. We have learned how to serve God. And we have learned how to live. We do not walk in the darkness of ignorance or of unknowing. We walk in the light. Our steps are guided by the gospel that we have heard and accepted. And Jesus has given each of us his Spirit.

Epiphany, the revelation of Christ as saviour for all nations, celebrates Jesus as the Light of the World, not just for one people or of a fraction of the human family. The light is offered to all. Some will come to the light and respond as they are moved to do by the Holy Spirit. Others may learn from the message of the gospels yet follow other faiths or religions. Jesus came for all, not for a few.

Our response is to walk in the light, to keep our eyes on it and to be guided by it. To be attracted away from it or to lose sight of it is to stray away into the darkness. Sometimes there are other things that look like light; they even seem brighter. Our ancestors long ago coined the expression: “All that glitters is not gold.” They knew how deceptive things can be sometimes. And sin too is usually very attractive. It offers instant pleasure or immediate gain. Even if we reach for it, soon afterward we sense that it has turned to ashes. And then we feel the darkness and its cold enwrapping us.

We are called to live in the light by the way we live. But we also share the light. Our conduct and lifestyle are seen by others. If we live in the light, then the light shines through us for others to see. If they see the light of faith and right-living, they will be attracted to it. If they see the darkness of wrongdoing, they will be repelled.

Today's celebration also reminds us that we too should accept everyone as children of God. That is sometimes a challenge, for we are at times afraid of or suspicious of those who are from different countries, who speak other languages, whose skin is a different colour. In the western world at the present time, there is a suspicion towards people of Middle Eastern origin and Muslims. Very few are terrorists. Most wish to live in peace and to worship the same God that we do, if in the Muslim tradition.

We can ask ourselves: How do I relate to people who are different from me? Do I make critical remarks or tell disparaging jokes about people who are dark-skinned, who are of another religion - Jews, Muslims, Protestants? Do I make fun of men or women whose ways are different from mine? It may seem like innocent fun, not intended to hurt anyone. But it does create an attitude in society that makes others appear to be second-class or sub-human and helps to create a climate of hate and discrimination. The extermination of the Jews by the Nazis in Europe during the Second World War did not appear suddenly. It followed many centuries of discrimination and hatred of Jews in many countries.

Our God created the human family in all its diversity. God sent the Son to all. Anyone can become a child of God by accepting and following the gospel of Jesus. We rejoice that it is offered to us. God has become a human person in Jesus Christ. The light has come into the world. Let us walk in the light that others may be drawn to it. May the light enwrap the earth, and the darkness be banished from the earth.

Reflection

January 1, 2019, New Years Day

In his New Year's Day message at the beginning of 1939, King George VI quoted some lines from a little-known poem called "At the Gate of the Year":

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year
"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."
And he replied, "Go into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."
So I went and finding the Hand of God
Trode gladly into the night
He led me towards the hills
And the breaking of day in the lone east.

Since then this poem has become famous.

Today we wish each other a Happy New Year. We wish for all good things for our families, our communities and for ourselves. We hope for good health, an absence of serious problems, and for all that we need for a comfortable life. We seek peace for ourselves and for the whole world. And yet we know that this year will have its share of problems, worries and ill health. And we believe that the hope for peace around the world remains elusive, despite the best efforts of so many to stop the violence and to bring into being a world in which there is justice and fairness for all.

On this eighth day of the Christmas season, we honour Mary, chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus. The Christ, God and human was born in time. Did Mary enjoy the gift of peace? Today's gospel tells us that after the birth of Jesus, she pondered on the visit of the shepherds and what they told her the angel had announced. What would this child do? What would he be for his people? Time would reveal the answers. Soon she would have to flee with Joseph and the Christ Child into Egypt. When they returned to Nazareth, their country was occupied by the Roman army. In time, she would see her son rejected by the leaders of their people and experience a violent death. And while she would not have known what the future held, she always believed that God's loving purpose was unfolding. She experienced an inner peace because she placed her trust in God, whom she knew would care for her, for her family and for her people. Mary experienced peace of mind, even in times of anxiety and loss.

Fifty years ago, Saint Pope Paul VI declared the first day of the year to be a special time of prayer for peace. This occurred five years after Saint Pope John XXIII's encyclical letter "Peace on Earth." Between those dates, this parish was established in its present form, on the foundation of St. Raphael's Parish, and dedicated to Mary Queen of Peace. This day since ancient times has honoured Mary's role in bringing Christ to the world. And in modern times, it is also a day of prayer for world peace. This parish and its name are reminders of these two aspects of our worship of God and witness to faith.

Everyone seeks peace of mind in an anxious, uncertain world. As the man at the gate of the year told the anxious traveller, we can find it by placing our trust in God, and doing God's will for us, even when the future looks unclear or even bleak. We can put our hand into the hand of God. Mary, the first disciple of Christ, found peace by trusting in God. We, the people of God, disciples like Mary, will find peace also by placing our trust in God.

Many believe that peace is only the absence of violence. If lives and property are safe, there is peace. In 1963, the year after the Cuban missile crisis, Pope St. John XXIII reminded the world that there can be no peace without justice. Wherever there is poverty or oppression, there will be fear and violence. Pope Francis has reminded us more recently that, although the nuclear threat has receded from what it was fifty years ago, the economic crisis that has struck most parts of the world has had a drastic effect on many.

We wish each other "Happy New Year." We invoke the name of Jesus, given to him at his initiation into the faith of the covenant. We wish the best but know that this year, like others before it, will have its share of joys and sorrows. War continues in parts of the Middle East and elsewhere in the world. Europe and North America are concerned about acts of terrorism in our cities and communities. There is a renewed concern about nuclear weapons. We continue to be concerned about the economy, and the cost of living. People of good will can work together so that all have enough, and no one has too little. And then justice and peace will grow in the world and prevail. Working for peace and justice, in whatever way we can, is what Christ wants us to do. To embrace God's will for us, as Mary did, will bring us the peace that comes only from God. And we must ponder patiently and reflect on what is happening in our lives as God's will for us unfolds in the time to come.

While Saint Pope John taught us to work for peace and justice, the fullness of peace is a gift from God. While we do what the Spirit leads us to do to build a world of peace and justice, we must pray fervently for peace for ourselves, our families and for all around the world. When we pray, we deepen our understanding that the Spirit of God is with us always. The Jewish people wish others "shalom," meaning peace. In the Hebrew or Old, Testament, there was no peace unless there was justice and fairness among people. We exchange the Sign of Peace at Mass today, sharing God's peace with one another before we receive the Holy Eucharist.

Let us go forward into this New Year gratefully accepting the time allotted to us as a gift of God. Let us each put our hand into the hand of God and go forward with confidence. Let us pray that we will see God's will for us clearly and have the faith and trust to follow it. Violence, economic uncertainty, poverty and oppression will not vanish from the world, though we pray they be less. With faith in God, and doing God's will, we shall know the peace that comes only from God.