

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – C

Debt – it's kind of an unpleasant word, isn't it, one with which I think just about everybody is acquainted, or will be at some point in their lives. It sounds very close to the word "death". And we have all kinds of it, an abundance of debt if you will: credit card debt, student loan debt, mortgages, car payments, medical bills, personal debts, let's not forget all the government debt, and so on. And there are different ways of dealing with it: working hard and paying it off over time, or trying to ignore it and letting it compound over time so that it gets even worse, or declaring bankruptcy so that it will just go away. And like so much else, some of it may be our own fault, caused by not knowing how to handle money, or by lack of discipline, over-spending and such; and some of it is not our fault, such as medical bills for unexpected illnesses or accidents. Regardless, it's one of those things that

nobody likes, except people who make money off of other people's debt.

What's this got to do with our readings though? Nothing – except for a little line that Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.” Perhaps you're thinking, “I still don't see the connection.” This “acceptable year” that Isaiah is referring to was known by the Jewish people as a Jubilee Year. This was a special year for the Jews, a year of celebration, a year in which, perhaps most happily of all, the poor were forgiven any debts they had accumulated. If a person had committed a crime, there was often a debt to be paid – the bigger the infraction, the bigger the debt. In the ancient world, people often became slaves as a way of paying off their debt. A person's debt could also be redeemed by a relative or a kinsman who would pay off the debt for you.

Jesus is reading this passage from Isaiah in a synagogue on the Sabbath. This took place, as Luke tells us in today's Gospel, at the beginning of his public ministry. He has just spent 40 days in the desert, fasting and praying; now that period of time has come to an end, and now he is ready to begin his public ministry, the mission for which God the Father had sent him into the world. Back then, there were no books – the Jewish Scriptures were instead written on scrolls – think of a long piece of paper or parchment or animal skin or whatever rolled up between what looked like two rolling pins. As they would read, they would keep turning the handles of the pins so they could keep moving through the scroll.

In our readings today, the Church links this Gospel, when Jesus goes into a synagogue and reads from a scroll, with another reading from a scroll. In our first reading, from the book of Nehemiah, which we don't hear from that often, a Jewish priest named Ezra reads the Jewish Law from a scroll to an assembly of

men, women, and children. It was a marathon reading – from daybreak till midday, it says. Most likely this was a reading from the Torah, or the first five books of the Old Testament, which includes the Jewish Law. And the people gathered together that day were moved to tears by what they heard. Why would they have been? A little context is necessary.

The book of Nehemiah recounts how the Jewish people, who had been in exile in Babylon for 70 years, were finally allowed to return home. Incidentally, only a small minority of the Jewish people actually made the return journey to Jerusalem. After 70 years, most of them had grown relatively accustomed to living in Babylon. Only perhaps the very oldest even remembered their homeland. And the return journey involved walking for 900 miles across the desert. So most people stayed put. Only the most ardent, probably those who were strongest in their Jewish identity and faith, chose to return. And what they found when they got

back was the city of Jerusalem abandoned and in ruins from the destruction it underwent at the hands of the Babylonians 70 years before. So under the direction of a man named Nehemiah, they set about rebuilding the city. And the priest-scribe Ezra in the meantime discovered an ancient scroll of the Jewish Law in the ruins of the Temple. The Jewish people considered this discovery a miracle, a sign from God, and so after the city walls had been rebuilt, all the men, women, and children were assembled to hear the reading of the Jewish Law for the first time in 70 years. And they were moved to tears at hearing it because it was a reminder of the covenant that the Lord God had entered into with them centuries before, and it included the promise that He would give them the Promised Land as their homeland, a promise which they saw as having been fulfilled with their return from Babylon.

Incidentally, this era of Ezra and Nehemiah, when the Jewish people had returned from exile, was also the time when the Lord

sent the last prophets to the Jewish people. After that, it's as though God went silent – there were no more prophecies for four hundred years – until John the Baptist appeared and proclaimed the imminent coming of the Messiah. And when Jesus went into the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth to read from the Scriptures, he announced, “Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Imagine being in that congregation and hearing those words: the prophets' words from centuries before were now fulfilled! Centuries ago, Isaiah had prophesied that the Lord would send a Messiah “to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.”

Jesus came to announce a Jubilee if you will: a time when all debts would be forgiven. But the debts that Jesus came to forgive

were not monetary, because believe it or not, monetary debts are not the greatest debts. The debts that Jesus came to forgive or to take upon himself – like the kinsman assuming the debts of his relative – are those created by sin. If a person steals from someone else and is caught, they usually have to make restitution – they have to return or pay back what they have stolen. Sin is like that – it's like a crime for which restitution has to be made. But Jesus came to make that restitution for us. That's because all sin is essentially a crime against God Himself. What kind of crime? As God's creatures, we owe him all our worship, honor, and praise. When we sin, we turn away from God, and whether we realize it or not, we refuse to give to God what is his due. And so restitution must be made. But being human, what kind of restitution can we make to God who is infinite and perfect? That's where Jesus comes in – fully human, and yet also divine, the only one who can make perfect restitution for our sins.

We are living in the age of the fulfillment of the Scriptures, that age which began 2000 years that day when Jesus went into the synagogue in Nazareth: the Messiah has come to redeem us, to cancel out the debts created by our sins, to free us from exile here on earth so that we might return to our heavenly homeland, to free us from our slavery to sin. Let us rejoice and be glad today for what the Lord has done for us. In the midst of our struggles in life, our struggles with temptation, let this be our strength: that Jesus has redeemed us.

- **January 25, 2025 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake**