

Homily for The Third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)
(26/01/20)
Sunday of the Word of God
Eve of the 75th Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz
(Holocaust Memorial Day)

Pope Francis has asked us all to celebrate this Third Sunday of Ordinary Time as 'The Sunday of the Word of God', and in his letter introducing this celebration he reminded us of the story of Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra is a priest who leads a group of exiled Jews back from Babylon to Jerusalem, where Nehemiah the governor is starting to rebuild the city. Once the exiles have returned, they are all gathered together and the priests read to them the Book of the Law. Listening to the words of the scriptures, standing once more in the City of David, the Jewish exiles are reduced to tears. Here they discover once again who they are, where they have come from; they discover how they fit into God's plan for the world; a gathering of individuals all hear the Law being read, they recognize that these words apply to them, and by the end of it all they are a people once again. They are united by what they have heard, by the single story that they have heard told, which is their story.

This is a great help to us as we listen to the reading of the scriptures. What is the point of the public reading of the scriptures? How is it different from us sitting and reading them alone? Both of them are important and life-giving, but the public reading of the scriptures is like the returned exiles listening in the public square in Jerusalem. As we listen to the reading of the scriptures we are caught up into a story which is our story, yours and mine, and together we discover more clearly who we are as we enter into the story that we share.

Today, then, we are beside the Sea of Galilee. There are fishing boats all along the shore, but just two of them catch the Lord's attention, and he speaks to some of the fishermen. He does not speak to them all, just to the ones that he has chosen. He has seen something in these four men that he does not see elsewhere. He sees in these men the possibility that they might see who he is, and respond. They are not perfect, they have their problems and their issues, but he sees in them the chance that they might respond. He calls James and John, for instance, but not their father, who was in the boat with them. He does not call them to believe something; he does not call them to act in any particular way; he calls them into a friendship with him – that's it: follow me. He has a task for them, but basically they are men who have been called to a new and different sort of life, a life lived in friendship with Christ.

Just as the reading of the Law helped the Jewish exiles to discover who they really were, to discover what held them together and united them, the reading of this story does the same for us. We are just like Peter, and Andrew, and James, and John. We are ordinary people with ordinary lives who have been called by Christ to live in friendship with him. Everything else flows from that, but that is the bottom line. We are a group of people who, recognizing the presence of

Christ in our lives, have been called to live in friendship with him. That is revealing for us individually, but also collectively, because the call is the same for all of us. Our friendship with Christ is not something exclusive, something about me and Him and no-one else. It is something communal. Jesus calls two pairs of brothers, he calls people together, not individually in this reading. We are called together, to live in friendship with Christ and with one another. And there is another level to the way in this reading helps us to discover who we really are. We are people who have been called, together, by the Lord to live in friendship with him but also, we share that call with Peter and Andrew and James and John and countless other Christians throughout time, throughout the world.

Listening to the public proclamation of the scriptures led the exiles to realize who they really were. It does the same for us. Each Sunday as we listen to the message of the Gospels our task is to discover, with the help of the preacher, something deeper about our nature, our destiny, our place in the world. We discover something about what holds us all together, and we discover something about who we are, and most exciting of all, we discover something about who and what we might yet become. We might become yet closer and deeper friends with Christ. No wonder the Jews returned from exile wept for joy as they heard the scriptures read to them!