

Sunday Homily

THIRD SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY

23 JANUARY 2022

YEAR C

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Luke 4:21

Illustration

St Teresa of Avila lived during the sixteenth century. She was famous for her profound spirituality and her inspired writing which grew out of her intimate relationship with God. She founded the Discalced Carmelites, a strictly enclosed religious order (discalced = without shoes), opening several convents in Spain. She was a strong and determined woman who was investigated by the Inquisition and suffered at the hands of jealous clerics, but who was much loved by those who knew her and has been admired ever since, even earning the title “Doctor” of the Christian Church.

In addition to her mystical prayer life, she was intensely practical in her observances, a Martha and Mary both rolled into one, and she made a statement which invites us to share these attributes. She declared that she (and therefore we) must be the eyes and ears, the hands and feet of Christ in the world for, if we are not, then who will do Christ’s work? Who will live the legacy Jesus left us? Who will spread the Gospel, speak for the prisoners, heal the sick and lift the burdens of the downtrodden, if not us?

Gospel Teaching

When Jesus stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth, and read from the scroll, it was not just to make a point about Isaiah’s prophecy. It was not only to claim his rightful inheritance, the prophetic mantle, the authority which derives from being the Messiah whose arrival had been expected for more than a thousand years. Jesus was not basking in the reflected glory of the scriptures, not even just to set himself off on the right track. This was, after all, the first time he had turned up in Nazareth since the life-changing events at his baptism and in the wilderness, when his true nature and vocation had become crystal clear.

No, what Jesus was doing, by acknowledging what had gone before, was to use this piece of scripture to declare unequivocally and openly who he was and as a ground plan and instructions for the future, immediate and long-term, for those who would become his disciples, then and now.

Jesus almost always taught *groups* of people, not just to utilise time and space more productively, but to ensure that everyone (or as many as possible) got the same message at the same time. In learning together as a group he encouraged

them to begin the process of becoming the “Jesus movement”, what we now call the Church, enabling them also to plan, build and act as a group.

This way of working was necessary to promote that measure of unity which enabled them to become what St Paul called “one body”, acting in unison. For in unity is strength and the power to overcome the forces which would seek to diminish or destroy the purity of Jesus’ message and the effectiveness of his action.

Jesus, when quoting Isaiah, was talking about himself, but his message was not solely repetition of the old law, in the synagogue where this was practised. Rather, it was the start of his teaching to us here today, in this place, and in every place where that teaching from the synagogue in Nazareth is still heard. It defined Jesus’ mission as God’s great act of liberation for his people, and it continues to define our mission today.

Application

In Nazareth, at the start of his ministry, Jesus became the pivotal point between what was and what is to come; enabling us to respect the past, but constantly turning us round to face the future; giving us the words which determine where we stand in relation to each other and in relation to his teaching and showing us what to do.

Jesus read that he was anointed by the Spirit of the Lord, and so are we at our baptism. To bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed. This is the mantle, the responsibility, he took on and which is passed to us. This is what St Teresa meant. The work of Jesus is the work of the people of God. Individually, we are Christ’s hands and feet, ears and eyes; together we are the whole body. This can be both a comfort and an awesome responsibility, to be an active part of the living scripture, from Isaiah until now. What a relief to know he shares it with us, and all his holy people, since that sabbath in the synagogue at Nazareth!