

Homily for the 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

January 26, 2025

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10 (Ezra reads from the Book of the Law.)

Responsory: Psalm 19 (Your words, Lord, are Spirit and life.)

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:12-30 (You were all baptized into the one body of Christ.)

Gospel: Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21 (Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.)

Today's first reading, from the Book of Nehemiah, shows us one of the most poignant scenes in all of Scripture. A remnant of the Jewish people has recently returned to Jerusalem after their exile in Babylon. There is virtually nothing left of what they used to call "home." The magnificent Temple of the Lord lies in ruins. The city wall that once protected them from their enemies has crumbled. Their houses are either destroyed or occupied by foreigners, who took possession of the abandoned city when the children of Israel were carried away as slaves. Everything that once defined them as a nation and a people seems to have been lost.

Then Ezra the priest brings out the "Book of the Law" – probably what we know today as the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy. From daybreak until midday, Ezra reads and interprets the book for all the men, women, and those children old enough to understand. They listen attentively, and they are deeply moved by what they hear. No doubt, they are moved to *repentance* as they hear all the precepts of the Lord which they and their ancestors have failed to obey. They weep with shame, realizing how far they have strayed from the covenant described in this sacred book. However, for a people who thought that they had lost absolutely everything, including their very identity, the Book of the Law reminds them of an important truth which their ancestors knew very well. The true identity of the Jewish people was never to be found in the land of Israel, in their gleaming city of Jerusalem, in their glorious Temple, or in any other material thing. Rather, it is their *covenant with God* which has always defined them as a people, and the Law is the basis of that covenant. Before the Exile, before the Jewish monarchy, even before entering the Promised Land, the Israelites were already God's Chosen People, bound to God and to each other by the Law.

What Ezra's reading of the Book of the Law did for the Jewish people, today's Second Reading does for us Christians. St. Paul's words to the Corinthians remind us where to look for our source of unity and identity. It is not in the Law, but in the person of *Christ* and our shared baptism into his death and resurrection. Through the one Spirit, we were all baptized into one Body, regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality, or social status. There is only one Body of Christ, and all of us are members of it. We are not all the same, any more than all the parts of a human body are identical. Just as each part of the body has its own unique function, so each of us is uniquely called by God to serve the Lord in our own particular way. However, despite our various gifts and vocations, we all share a *common dignity*, which derives from our participation in Christ's Body. Hence, underneath all the differences is a radical *equality*, which fosters unity among us.

No one is *more* or *less* a member of the Body than anyone else. And, no one is more or less indispensable to the health and function of the Body. All of us need to do our part, working together in harmony. The Lord has gifted each one of us for an intended purpose. So, we should carefully avoid the temptation to compare ourselves with others and lament that we were given this particular role to play, while someone else seems to have a more prestigious or more important role. Those judgments are as absurd as an arm or a leg saying, "Because I'm not an eye or an ear, I'm of no use to the body." Equally damaging is our tendency to judge other people for contributing *less* to the body, disparaging their gifts as useless or inferior to our own. That's like the head saying to the feet, "I don't need you." The Lord needs *all of us*, and we all need each other. Therefore, the members of the Body of Christ should not only recognize and utilize our *own* gifts, but also acknowledge and appreciate the gifts that others contribute to the common good. And, all of us should dedicate ourselves to serving the Lord and each other with all the talents that God has graciously bestowed upon us.

As we strive to do our part in service of the Body, we must also be wary of neglecting some of our brothers and sisters. When Jesus announced his messianic identity, he did so in a way that drew the most marginalized members of society to himself. He quoted the prophecy of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me 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." The poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed – these are the people who get pushed to the periphery of society, the ones whom others scapegoat and vilify and dehumanize. Jesus was declaring them to be worthy of his care, his protection, and his mercy. And he was making clear that they would be welcome in his Kingdom.

The question confronting us today is whether the marginalized will be welcome in *our country*. Will we, the American people, judge them worthy of *our government's care and protection and mercy*? We have become increasingly tolerant of violent and dehumanizing rhetoric toward immigrants and other vulnerable people in our society. That ugly rhetoric has now become official government policy, through a whole slew of executive orders targeting refugees, asylum seekers, the children of undocumented parents, and a whole host of other people who desperately need someone to stand up for them and defend their human rights. What will our response be? How much cruelty will the American people be willing to tolerate from our political leaders, as long as they agree with us on one or two issues that matter most to us? If we insist on making those cynical calculations and ignoring the human suffering that *we are enabling*, we should at least abandon the hypocrisy of calling ourselves a "Christian nation." A Christian nation does not condone cruelty, does not look the other way when the powerful oppress the weak, and does not celebrate the victory of injustice over mercy. All of us need to take a good, hard look in the mirror and ask ourselves, "*What do we stand for*, and does it bear *any resemblance* to the glad tidings for the poor and the oppressed that Jesus announced in the Gospel today?"