

HOM 3rd Sunday 2019 C Jan 27

About 50 years after Jerusalem was attacked in 597 BC, and the first Jewish Temple – the one Solomon had built – was destroyed and God's people were led away as captives to Babylon (present day Iraq) – the so-called Babylonian Exile ended. A Persian King, Cyrus, from present day Iran, conquered Babylon and decreed that the Jewish people could return to their homeland of Judah and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple.

Less than a third of the people chose to return. The majority had grown comfortable where they were, including a generation of young people who grew up on foreign soil and had never seen the place from where their parents and grandparents came.

Those who returned struggled to restore their homes, the city and the Temple. And even though another Temple had been built and dedicated 20 years after their return, restoring the Jewish nation and culture was a much greater challenge. A hundred years after their return there were signs that it just wasn't going well. Un-repaired breaches in the city wall were symbolic of the outside influence of the pagan culture.

That's where Nehemiah and Ezra come in. Around 450 BC, the Persian King sent his Jewish servant, Nehemiah, to help the Jews get their city wall fully repaired and their government put in order. When this was done, Ezra, a Jewish priest and scribe, well-versed in the Torah, was engaged to re-introduce the Jewish People to the Law. And so with all the Jews of Judah and Jerusalem gathered together, Ezra then read aloud the first five books of the Old Testament and explained everything to them.

Hearing the Word of God and receiving instruction about it, the People wept at first with contrition for their failings and then at Ezra's prompting, rejoiced and celebrated with praise and thanksgiving and a good meal this opportunity to hear and re-commit themselves to living by God's commandments.

About 20 years ago when I visited the Jewish Synagogue in Uniontown with our Youth Ministry Group from St. Hedwig and St. Cecilia partner parishes, I was impressed by many things. For example, I was surprised that before Jewish women could enter the nave of the synagogue, they had to put a veil over their head. Veils were in the foyer of the synagogue for any who forgot to bring their own.

I was most impressed, however, by the sanctuary of the synagogue – elevated like ours -- which had only a podium and a glass display case in the center against the back wall. In the case were scrolls with the Jewish Law and the writings of the prophets.

The elder who gave a tour explained that for the Sabbath Services on Friday evening and on Saturday, he or another elder or a circuit-riding rabbi (since they had no resident rabbi) would read from the scrolls and give a teaching based on them and lead the prayers.

Today, as in time of Jesus, there are no altars in Jewish synagogues. Only the Temple in Jerusalem had the one altar of sacrifice and all the other towns of Judah had a synagogue. The people listened each week to the Word of God proclaimed in their hometown synagogues, and then at least once a year, journeyed to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice in the Temple, where the sacrifice prescribed by the Law was offered daily.

It was as though the Jewish People participated in the Liturgy of the Word in their synagogue and then in a Liturgy of the Eucharist in the Temple. However when the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, it was never rebuilt, and the Jewish People were scattered far and wide, without a priesthood, and without an altar of sacrifice right down to our day, when an Islamic Mosque now stands where the Jerusalem Temple once stood.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus, who had been teaching in synagogues in Galilee, 60 miles north of Jerusalem, officially begins His public ministry. He does so by going into the synagogue in His hometown of Nazareth and, after reading from the prophet Isaiah, announces that He is the *Anointed One* described and foretold by Isaiah who has been sent to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, good news to the poor. This is an epiphany event whereby Jesus makes Himself known as the Promised Messiah.

Notice that Jesus' public ministry takes the form of Jewish worship and of the Mass itself. First He travels around proclaiming the Word of God regarding the Kingdom of Heaven with signs like healing and casting out demons, and this will lead to His oblation or self-offering on the Cross – to His Death and Resurrection, His saving sacrifice of obedience and love by which the Word of God is lived out.

One can see in this the pattern of the Mass – wherein the Word of God is proclaimed and explained in the Liturgy of the Word i.e., the Scripture readings and homily, and then is responded to and lived out by joining in Jesus' saving sacrifice of love in the Liturgy of the Eucharist to which the Word of God beckons us. It's like God speaking to us and inviting us to live in oneness with Him, and the only way to that complete nuptial oneness with Him is by way of our self-offering to and with Jesus unto the Cross and Resurrection by way of Holy Communion.

As we live this out, we do so as members of Christ's Mystical Body, each of us having something to do for the good of the whole Body, the Church, and so helping it to grow to full stature, so that all the willing can inherit a place in God's eternal Kingdom.

In our day, not only is the Church surrounded by a secularized culture that would like to put it out of business – i.e., to destroy it, it also has internal problems. Members – even leaders -- who have succumbed to the culture of immorality and death have weakened the Body of Christ. There is even compelling evidence that enemies of Christ have managed to infiltrate the hierarchy of His Church like a virus.

Healing will require strong medicine – a powerful antidote. It will require the faithful to commit themselves to God's will like Mary did – deliberately, freely, without reservation, and reciprocally unto the Cross with Jesus. Then, when the Church is healed, even our sick culture can begin to heal.

But if not, the Lord Himself will come at the right time to cast out all evil and to rescue His Bride who will have been fully conformed to Him in the cultural crucible of the anti-Christ.

Brothers and sisters, I invite you to join in Jesus' healing and saving sacrifice of love like Mary did praying these words silently and sincerely at Holy Communion and striving to live them out between Masses: I AM ALL YOURS O MOST LOVING JESUS THROUGH MARY YOUR MOTHER. .