

## Readings for the Third Sunday after Epiphany

26<sup>th</sup> January 2025

### First Reading: Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

### Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts.

Gospel: St Luke 4:14-21

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

**A Reflection for the Third Sunday after Epiphany**

This week, I have felt increasingly that we are living in a mad and scary world. It has been an astonishing week, although I suppose that events and statements from across the pond should not have been entirely unexpected – they were well-signalled after all. The fragile ceasefire in Gaza has held, more or less, and families have been reunited, for which we give thanks. And yet, at the same time, there have been increased attacks in the West Bank and Lebanon, and suffering has been compounded for other families. Why? Why is it that, for some people in the Middle East, the only solution is the complete annihilation of another group of people? How can that ever be a solution?

In the United States, a new President has been inaugurated who, to my mind at least, has a tenuous grasp of truth, never mind the criminal record, and yet was elected by the majority of Americans. Why? Why do so many Americans appear to think that demonising others, be they immigrants, gay or transgender people, or simply poor, will solve the nation’s problems?

When I disagree with someone, or don’t understand why they are following a particular course of action, I try to understand their point of view, their reasoning, to see why their life experiences have led them to this position. I may not agree with them but, if possible, I will agree to differ for I believe that diversity is important, that we are not uniform and people have a right to hold different opinions. Sometimes I question my own sanity, whether my own understanding is blinkered, when so many other people have a different perspective. What am I missing?

But sometimes agreeing to differ is not acceptable. It is not good enough to agree to differ when people are being murdered wholesale, when justice is at stake for millions of vulnerable people. And I have been challenged recently

by the example of people who have stood up for what they believe in, what they believe to be right and true and just, at considerable personal cost.

One of them was Mariann Edgar Budde. You may not immediately recognise the name but, if you have been attending to the news this week, you will probably have heard some of her words. She is the Bishop of Washington, and she preached at the Inaugural Prayer Service in the National Cathedral for the new political administration, in the presence of President Trump and Vice President Vance. It is only the final part of her sermon that has been publicised, but the whole thing is well worth watching if you can and I commend it to you – it's on YouTube and is less than 15 minutes, but packed with food for thought.

The theme of her sermon was 'Unity'; not agreement but the unity that fosters community across diversity and division, serving the common good; unity that enables people to live together in freedom. She said that such unity is aspirational, a big ask for our prayers, and not worthy of those prayers unless supported by action. Such unity is possible with God's help – not perfectly for we are imperfect people – but enough to live up to ideals of equality and human dignity. Such unity needs to be built on firm foundations, and she identified some of these as honouring the inherent dignity of all human beings, honesty in our dealings with one another, and humility.

And her sermon concluded with the part that has attracted all the attention: an appeal to the President, who has claimed 'to know the providential hand of a loving God', to have mercy on 'those who are scared now'. His response has been to insult her on social media, and for his Press Secretary to demand that she apologise for telling lies. Sadly, I am unsurprised. Why is mercy offensive? For sure, I still try to understand ... but I don't.

So what do we do in such situations, when the world seems mad and scary, when we don't understand, when the thoughts and actions of others seem so alien to us? I find today's readings helpful in this context because, for me, they tell us to go back to first principles. In the reading from Nehemiah, the ancient Israelites (not to be confused with modern day Zionists in Israel, as I have to constantly remind myself) had come back from exile in Babylon to rebuild their ruined holy city and Temple. Having rebuilt the city walls and gates, Nehemiah the governor asked Ezra the priest to read from the holy Scriptures, a reading that started with a morning but continued for a week. The reading was with interpretation so that the people had understanding – that all important understanding. They were reminded of their spiritual inheritance as God's people, of their loving but just God, and of the holiness of life to which they were called. And their response was to worship God. These principles remain important for us too: we too are called back to the scriptures, we too have the inheritance of a loving and just God who calls us to holiness of life and to worship God.

And in our Gospel passage, Jesus also reads from the word of God in the synagogue at Nazareth. The words he reads are about himself and God's purposes for the world, that he brings good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. The cynic in me feels that, in Washington, the new administration thinks it has the year of the Lord's favour without bothering too much about what precedes it here. True, they have released some captives; there has been a presidential pardon for those jailed for insurrection after the last presidential election, but I'm not convinced that is what this passage of Scripture refers to. It was more heartening to read of the woman who refused the presidential pardon as she considered she had been jailed justly.

The prophet Micah, in an oft-quoted verse, tells us: 'What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?'

This is what Jesus came to show us as the Gospel passage tells us, this is what we are called to as all of Scripture reminds us, this is what the Bishop of Washington was getting at in her plea to the President. When we go back to first principles, when we do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God, we find that we all have a part to play in bringing good news to the poor, releasing those who are captive in so many different ways, bringing sight (understanding) to those who can't see, and freeing the oppressed from their burdens. We need to do these things if we are truly to enjoy the year of the Lord's favour.

When we feel that we live in a mad and scary world, when we feel we simply don't understand why other people are behaving as they are, these are truths to hang on to, truths to live by, truths to tell anyone who will listen, and truths we must call on politicians world-wide to live up to.

Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God.