

EPIPHANY: CELEBRATING GOD'S GIFT FOR ALL PEOPLE

Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 24, 2010

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:14-21

Homecoming King

This week's Gospel text begins with Luke's summary statement of Jesus' Galilean ministry in which we learn of Jesus' widespread reputation and his being "praised by everyone" (4:15, *GNT*). The scene then shifts to Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, "where he had been brought up" (4:16, *GNT*). He's the town's "homecoming king." How will he be received by the local folk?

Jesus' inaugural sermon at the Nazareth synagogue connects his mission and ministry with the prophetic words of Isaiah (61:1-2; 58:6) and to the "year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:19, *NRSV*) – a year of "Jubilee" when good news is brought to the poor, liberty is proclaimed to the captives, and the oppressed are set free (4:18, 19). Good news to be sure! Preach it, Jesus! Amen!

Yes; everyone resonates with Jesus' words. But now comes the hard part—actually putting those words into practice and offering to God true worship as outlined in Isaiah 58 and 61 and proclaimed anew by Jesus. Are we offended, or challenged to repent and proclaim "jubilee" through lives of service and love? Will we be moved to respond upon learning what God requires? (see Nehemiah 8:9; Micah 6:8).

This week's pericope from Luke will continue next week and conclude with Jesus being rejected by those who "were impressed with him" and who initially "marveled at the eloquent words he spoke" (4:22, *GNT*). Praise will turn to anger and violence, just as later on joyous "Hosannas" will give way to hostile shouts of "Crucify him." And Jesus will tell us that "prophets are never welcomed in their hometown" (4:24, *GNT*).

Fast forward 2000 years ... Is this axiom still relevant?

In our own time, we recall the prophetic voice of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday was commemorated last week. Dr. King dared to speak out against injustice, which led to the ultimate sacrifice of his life by an assassin's bullet on April 3, 1968.

On November 13, 2006, at the Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial groundbreaking ceremony in Washington, DC, then U.S. Senator Barak Obama paid tribute to Dr. King with these words:

“By dint of vision and determination, and most of all faith in the redeeming power of love, he endured the humiliation of arrest, the loneliness of a prison cell, the constant threats to his life, until he finally inspired a nation to transform itself, and begin to live up to the meaning of its creed.”

In *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (April 1963), Dr. King stated, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” His words seem to echo the words of the apostle Paul from this week’s epistle: “If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26a, *GNT*).

Paul writes: “Christ is like a single body, which has many parts; it is still one body, even though it is made up of different parts” (1 Corinthians 12:12, *GNT*); and he reminds us that all of us “have been baptized into the one body by the same Spirit” (12:13, *GNT*) – the Spirit that anointed and empowered Jesus, our Lord. What we do today is a continuation of the work of that same Spirit.

As we conclude this year’s Octave for Christian Unity (January 18-25), may we hold fast to the hope and vision that we are all united in the body of Christ and together we are called to overcome social barriers and strive for equality and social justice for all people. Will we accept or reject the voice of Jesus, our “homecoming King,” and the prophetic voices of our own time?

This week’s Reflection was prepared by Barbara Bernstengel, former Director of the Education Unit in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship at the American Bible Society.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Gambia – With thanks to God for the expanding literacy program and for the use of the *God’s Story* film, and with prayers for funds to develop the literacy program further and to train the new coordinator to develop primers, and with prayers for translation projects and that the Bible Week celebration will lead people to be more committed to the Word of God; **Ghana** – With thanks to God for the completed Ewe translation and Asante, Akuapem, and Fante revision projects, for the launch of the Esahie *Faith Comes By Hearing* Proclaimers, and for the transformed lives of children receiving Bibles under the *One Million Bibles for School Children* project; approximately 600,000 Bibles have been distributed in two and a half years, and with prayers for funds to enable the distribution of one million Bibles; **Senegal** – With thanks to God for work among the TAZI audiences, and with prayers for translation projects, the HIV/AIDS program, and the literacy project.

Activity Corner: “Spreading God’s Message” Poster

Supplies needed: Bible; Bible Concordance; poster board or newsprint; markers; crayons (for younger children)

Using a Bible Concordance, look up various Bible verses with the word “justice” and discuss how these passages speak of God’s justice (examples: Psalm 72:1-2; Isaiah 1:17; 10:1-2; 56:1-2; Jeremiah 21:12; Amos 5:24; Micah 6:8).

Read together Psalm 19. Across the top of the poster board of a sheet of newsprint, write the words, SPREADING GOD’S MESSAGE ALL OVER THE WORLD. Read together 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. Down the side of the poster board or newsprint, write the words, HANDS, FEET, EYES, EARS, MOUTH. Invite members of your household to talk about what it means to be the “Body of Christ” in the world. In what ways can we use our hands, feet, eyes, ears, and mouth to spread God’s message and to speak out for justice, especially on behalf of those who are “voiceless” and marginalized in our society today? Write down everyone’s responses on the poster board or newsprint and encourage younger children to participate by drawing pictures. Display the poster throughout the week where you gather for family devotions. Incorporate everyone’s responses into a prayer. Conclude by singing together “I Love to Tell the Story” or “O Zion Haste, Your Mission High Fulfilling” or “Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life,” or one of your favorite hymns.