

Year C from Second week Ordinary time.

Second Sunday Ordinary Time.

Isaiah 62: 1-5 1 Cor. 12: 4-11 John 2: 1-12

January in the southern hemisphere is often a time for weddings so today's Gospel gives us an opportunity to reflect on this sacrament.

The symbol of the wedding, as used in the ancient scriptures, is a sign of partnership with Yahweh. Partnership is seen as having four dimensions. Israel, the human person, all nations and creation are described at various times as partners of God.

It is a source of wonder that in early times the people of God came to see their connection to God in the language of relationships. God is always God-in-relationship. God's partners are always the recipients of the action of God. There was never a suggestion of diminishing the glory of God but at the same time they understood that God was somehow affected by the relationship.

The people of God intuited that God was committed to them with passion. This passion was understood in two ways. First they ascribed to God strong feelings of concern, care and affection. Second they understood that God was ready to suffer with and suffer for the partner in what ever trouble or danger they found themselves. Isaiah could write on behalf of Yahweh, "I will not be silent. I will not be quiet until my people are vindicated. As a young man marries a virgin so shall your Builder marry you. As a bridegroom rejoices in his bride so shall your God rejoice in you."

The wedding at Cana needs to be read in the light of this understanding. To reduce it to a miracle about water and wine is to lose its import. The wedding celebration provides the context to enable us to see a greater reality. The use of "on the third day" also alerts us to the presence of the action of God. The bride and groom whose wedding is being celebrated are in the background. In the foreground are another couple. Mary, the supplicant, asks for help. Mary, the disciple, has trust in divine providence. In the place of the divine spouse, stands Jesus. "The Word was in the world, yet the world did not know it."

The care, concern and affection of God are manifest in the Son. The lavishness of the gift marks it as Godly. As Nehemiah proclaimed when the covenant with God was celebrated, "Go eat rich foods and drink sweet wines, and allot portions to those who have nothing prepared; for today is holy to our Lord. Do not be saddened this day, for rejoicing in the Lord must be your strength." Neh. 8:10

That Jesus embodies the passion of Yahweh is also evident in the reference by Jesus to his hour. "How does this concern of yours involve me?"

"and we have seen his glory:
the glory of an only Son coming from the Father,
filled with enduring love."

So the story concludes, "Thus did he reveal his glory, and his disciples believed in him."

The pattern of relationships established by God with Israel, humans, nations and creation is visible in the ministry of Jesus. As John narrates his Gospel he will flesh out his understanding of how the God-who-relates is Emmanuel, God-with-us.

In the descent by Jesus into the power of death and his being raised through faithful obedience, the drama of the lives of all humankind is given new hope.

In the Christian story, Paul sees the extension of the saving power of God, in his use of the metaphor of the Body of Christ. By using the gifts given to us we too can share in the passion of God.

Third Sunday Ordinary Time

Nehemiah 8:2-12 1 Corinthians 12: 12-30 Luke 1: 1-4, 4:14-21

Today the table of the Word is spread with abundance. Nehemiah and Ezra were pivotal figures in the establishment of Judaism after the return from exile.

How do you gather a scattered people? The books of Ezra and Nehemiah show us that collaboration is a key factor in the establishment of community. Nehemiah, a layman, had deep faith and the ability to set up a sound administrative system. Ezra, a priest, provided a unity and cohesion by insisting on the primacy and centrality of Torah as the foundation stone of Judaism.

Ezra assembled the people in an open space before the Water Gate. He positioned himself on a stage so as to be visible to all. The people comprised all the adults and those young people deemed to have reached the age of reason.

The liturgical action consisted of three very important parts. First, the Word was proclaimed. The people received it on their feet. This implied a readiness to hear and respond. Second, the Word was heard. The people acknowledged the Word by the affirmation, Amen, and a prostration as an act of worship of God. Third the Word was interpreted. A team of Levites helped Ezra to break open the Word for the nourishment of the people.

This sacramental action, proclaiming, hearing and interpretation of scripture, was the means by which Israel was constituted as a people. The day concluded with a call to community partying. The word of God is to be received with joy not sadness. The holiness of the occasion called for the best food and drink in the context of a shared meal.

In the establishment of the Christian covenant the same pattern of the liturgical reception of the word, followed by the "breaking of the bread" became the constitutional element of the Body of Christ.

Against this background Luke presents his Good News. He aims to provide a narrative of the "things accomplished amongst us." His authorisation comes from eye-witnesses and the role of interpretation by the apostolic tradition.

The second passage is an introduction to the ministry of Jesus. Jesus returns from his *exile* in the desert to begin the proclamation of the Kingdom and thus gather up the scattered people of God. The scattered are the poor, people alienated by interpretations of the word of God which have destroyed joy and provided the bread of sorrow rather than holy feasting.

In this passage the pattern of the work of Jesus is established. In the desert he repudiated various false images of the Messiah. Now, in the power of the Spirit he stands to proclaim the word. The people listen attentively, then Jesus provides a new interpretation. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Following the pattern established in the ancient community, Jesus will provide apostles, teachers and prophets to contribute to and carry on the work of proclamation and interpretation.

The first reading points to the value of shared gifts through collaboration in ministry, Paul re-emphasises this through the image of the body of Christ. This powerful picture of a unique being, created through the image of the harmonious interplay of various parts, is the pattern of our community life as Christians.

Unity is not achieved by uniformity but by the contribution of the parts. The health of the whole depends on the strength of each part to function according to its gift. Collaboration is the key to the mission of Christ.

Fourth Sunday Ordinary Time.

Jeremiah 1: 4-19 1 Corinthians 12: 31-13:13 Luke 4: 21-30

Last week the readings spoke of the role of the interpreter of the Word of God. This ministry is developed in the readings of today. One of the officially recognised interpreters was the prophet.

Luke describes Jesus as an interpreter. He has Jesus claim this prophetic ministry by his use of a proverb. Prophecy in Israel was complex. There were many manifestations of the gift. There were schools of prophets as well as individuals operating alone. Prophecy, as the claim by individuals to speak God's revelatory word, refers both to individuals and to a body of literature.

One way the prophet had of establishing their credentials was to describe a personal call by God. In the first reading Jeremiah tells his call story. These stories tell of a direct experience of God. However when the call stories are looked at as a group it is possible to detect a formula.

Common elements are, that the initiative comes from God; there is often an initial resistance from the one called; the prophet is sometimes commanded to speak. Whatever the actual personal experience, the narratives have taken on an institutionalised form. This seems to indicate that the community has established a formula for authenticity.

Some of the elements of Jeremiah's call are present in Luke's account of Jesus' origins. As with Jeremiah, the call of Jesus precedes his conception. Jesus' youth is not a bar to his effectiveness. He, too, is called to gird his loins and not allow himself to be crushed by rejection.

Jesus' preaching begins with affirmation from the hearers. "All who were present spoke favourably of him."

Almost immediately the mood changed. The use of the reading from Isaiah was welcomed. It is good news that the people have waited a long time to see fulfilled. But, somehow conveyed in the words was the suggestion that Jesus himself has a role to play in the inauguration of the new age, the eternal Jubilee and it is this that is not acceptable. It is not to be borne that God would act in someone so close to home.

Paradoxically the people then claim that, if Jesus has anything to offer, first preference should be given to his own people.

The examples that follow indicate that Jesus was hinting that the word of God was spoken universally, not to one people. The stories of the prophets, Elijah and Elisha, show that God's love and mercy are to be found wherever there is a need and the faith to receive it. The reaction from the group was swift and indignant. They rose up and wanted to throw him not only out of the synagogue but out of the town. The hearers have hardened their hearts to the word.

Paul extends his theme of the nature of the body of Christ by both emphasising and de-emphasising the variety of role. It is important to accept the variety gifts but it

would be wrong to set up a kind of rivalry around position. No gift for ministry has any value unless the motivation is love.

Paul's hymn to true love is an awe-inspiring challenge to those who claim to be followers of Christ. The first stanza describes the folly of good works done without a relationship built on love. The second stanza describes love in terms that appear prosaic but, because they allow for infinite development, are transcendental. The third stanza is distilled wisdom from years of reflected experience.

As we grow in grace we learn what is essential and what is ephemeral. We come to know even as we are known.

Fifth Sunday Ordinary Time.

Isaiah 6:1-8 1 Corinthians 15: 1-11 Luke 5: 1-11

The theme of call continues in today's readings. Luke places Jesus' call, to some to become disciples, in the context of the proclamation of the Word of God. This could suggest that in the time of Luke the call to discipleship had a liturgical setting.

The story develops over four scenes. Jesus selects a boat and sits as he would in the synagogue. He follows the scripture with a short teaching. By making the countryside his locus for teaching Jesus emphasises that the word is paramount not the venue.

After the teaching Jesus asks Simon to move out into deep water and begin to fish. Simon, who has fished unsuccessfully at the optimum time, is prepared to try again at Jesus' request. In choosing Simon's boat Jesus meets his potential disciple in his own environment. Simon is responsive to Jesus even before he hears the explicit call to join Jesus in ministry.

The call to leave the shore becomes a metaphor for the risk entailed in a new life-style. There is also a risk in taking advice from someone who knows nothing of the fishing business.

Handling the catch needs more than an individual's resources. It requires communal effort. Discipleship often begins in a family. The call to discipleship can come from one's family or friends.

Simon's initial conversion comes from the sight of the unexpected. He receives a surprise. Paul, also, describes his conversion in terms of shock. The unexpected triggers fear, as if he suddenly becomes aware of the mystery that lies just beyond his usual pragmatic approach to life. So often these little visions of both light and shadow offer us a new way of being and doing.

Simon's reaction is to separate himself from the power of Jesus' presence for he intuits that the encounter will have life-changing effects. Simon's companions also experience the awe and fear of the presence of God now tangible amongst them.

The call of Isaiah is also experience in liturgy. Isaiah, like Simon, is conscious of his inadequacies and feels the power and majesty of God. The symbol of the ember purifying the lips of the prophet stresses the importance of the role of proclaimer of the Word. The ability to say, "Here I am, send me," comes, first of all, from God who calls all to participate in re-creation and restoration. Awareness of one's own shortcomings is suddenly inescapable. Such self-understanding is the beginning of humility.

The church selects the beginning of Paul's great treatise on resurrection for this Sunday. The whole teaching will be covered over the next few weeks. The resurrection of Jesus is the starting point of Christian faith. Paul states that the central mystery of Christ, his death and resurrection, is not a radical break with

scripture but a natural development. That is, the life death and resurrection of Jesus belong within the unfolding of the design of God from eternity.

The tradition about the resurrection, expressed in the Gospels in narrative form, continued to be shaped by the experience and reflection of the Christian community. "after-death" stories were common in Hellenistic culture. New Testament theology differs considerably. The first difference is that Jesus was experienced as present in a more powerful way than before, not as a spectre. The second is that the experiences had a communitarian nature. Paul cites as his authority the "seeing" by significant members of the community. It is the presence of the risen Christ that brings community to birth. God who is the author of the resurrection of Jesus can bring about spiritual re-birth in the most unlikely candidates.