Third Sunday after Epiphany 24 Jan 2016

Nehemiah 8: 1-10
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 12: 12-31
Luke 4:14-21

Today's readings quite clearly give us an opportunity to reflect on ourselves as a Church community; the first reading has Ezra reading the "book of the law of Moses" with "All the people gathered together into the square"; and the gospel has Jesus going to church in his home town, or rather the synagogue.

In between we have Paul's letter providing a reflection on the very constitution of the Church, and so too the dynamics of us gathered here:

> "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. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit."

We might look at the first reading and the gospel as bookends to the reflection Paul offers in relation to us and to the Church; and then as we compare these two bookends we can discover a real sense of movement, and also discover an important insight that Jesus brings to the faithful Jewish community.

The first reading offers us an account of the people gathered to hear the word of God and it has some, only some, resonance with us here today:

> "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. 2 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. 3 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."

I can't picture any of us gathering to hear a reading from "the book of the law of Moses" that is going to last "from early morning until midday".

However the purpose is underlined three times in the text, it was so that those gathered could gain 'understanding'; of course we have television, the internet and of course Google and Wikipedia so that we can gain understanding; or do we?

The more primitive peoples of Nehemiah's time certainly did not have the distractions that we have, but do we have the desire for understanding that they had?

I wonder if we've lost some of that desire in a world so full of distractions, a world in which most people hardly give any time in seeking to understand the 'word of God'.

As we picture that early community in the first reading, we might also see ourselves gathered as the Bible is brought down in front of the people for the reading of the gospel; and we should remember that to them "the book of the law of Moses" really was 'gospel'.

So now we skip to today's gospel narrative, another 'church' gathering, this time in Jesus' home town;

> "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, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him."

It is good to be reminded that Jesus was a faithful member of his synagogue, he was within the established tradition, and the narrative certainly parallels the scene from the first reading.

However the insight for us comes when he had finished his reading, his duty, in the synagogue:

> "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. 21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.""

Jesus sits down in Church; he is not the high priest, he is not the one up front, rather he returns to his seat in the congregation; and in that movement we can possibly see each of us.

What is so important to hear is what he said when he had taken his place back among the people; "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"; that is the voice that came forth from the 'body of Christ' when he was sitting in his local church; and that too is what we also are called to utter.

It is good to hear again what Jesus read before he sat down;

> "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, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

The clear contrast between the first reading and the gospel, the two bookend accounts of church gatherings is that in the first there was a seeking of understanding, and in the second there is a clarity that the word of God had been understood; and we, each and all, have the benefit of that clarity.

We sit together here as the church as a gathering of those who are called to fulfil the scripture.

I'm sure Paul almost anticipated the 'Anglican response', for just as we are about to let ourselves and each other off the hook with a 'not me', 'I can't possibly fulfil the scriptures', Paul tells us that we all have a part to play.

> "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. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many."

And as if to underline and encourage even the most reluctant, the text finishes with "strive for the greater gifts."

Paul's understanding is not restricted to the Church, it is a reflection for each of us as we seek to discern the many different aspects of who we are; and so is a reflection for us to discern the part that our prejudices, our habits and our endless distractions have in making us who we are; it is a reflection for us to consider how we might "strive for the greater gifts."

And as we near the celebration of Australia day it is a reflection for us to discern our cultural identity; to see ourselves beyond the confines of border security and know we are an integral part of creations unfolding; what happens in Syria is happening to as part of our one body..

On a global level, we might also reflect on those members that we somehow seek to pretend are not a part of us, the refugees, homosexuals, those with disabilities, those suffering from mental health issues, Muslims and those with other belief systems different from our own…

When we celebrate our song on Australia day we will hear:

> Our land abounds in nature's gifts
> Of beauty rich and rare;

For those who've come across the seas
We've boundless plains to share;

Let's keep in mind Paul's encouragement as we start the second verse:

Beneath our radiant Southern Cross
We'll toil with hearts and hands;
To make this Commonwealth of ours
Renowned of all the lands;

Let us each and all, "strive for the greater gifts"

Peter Humphris