

## Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 27, 2020

Reflection by Sister Virginia Jung, OSB

IS 8:23—9:3; 1 COR 1:10-13, 17; MT 4:12-23 OR 4:12-17

As you entered the chapel this morning, perhaps you noticed the St. John's Bible open to today's very exciting reading from Nehemiah. I put it there to share it with you because I was so pleased to see the illuminations of the Square before the Watergate and the verse: *For the joy of the LORD is your strength.*

The Book of Nehemiah appears in the Historical Books of the Old Testament; his name sounds like a prophet, but just to remind us, he was not a prophet; Nehemiah was governor of Judah. He was a Jewish man, living in the Babylonian exile, the emperor's cupbearer, a high ranking official in Persia who, when he heard how badly things were going back in Jerusalem, asked to be sent back. The Persians had facilitated the restoration of the temple, but the actual faith and culture of the Jews were still in ruins, so Nehemiah, along with the scribe Ezra, were charged with restoring the Jewish community, bringing peace to the area. In this reading that we hear today, we catch a glimpse of Ezra's covenant renewal ceremony which takes up several chapters of the book of Nehemiah. We also are reenacting it in a way ourselves, as we do, week after week, day after day, when we gather together to listen to someone stand in a special place, and proclaim the Word of God. For thousands of years now, it is a practice we have in common with all people of the Book. As Benedictines, this gathering to prayerfully listen to the Word of God is precious to us, built into the Liturgy of the Hours. Take time this week to notice how you are feeling, probably many things, as you gather to listen to the Word. The people in the Square before the Watergate of Jerusalem are weeping, - with tears of compunction, relief, joy, gratitude, shame, -we do not know. But Ezra encourages them all -notice there is no division of men, women and children - that today is a day to rejoice in the renewal of the covenant, in God's love and intention for them as revealed in the Book of the Law. The reform that Ezra and Nehemiah bring to Jerusalem is important to Jewish history and therefore to our own salvation history as Christians. It eventually leads to the canonization of Scripture and the religious practices

based on the Torah. It ushers into Jewish history the waning of sacrificial offering and the growth of the observance of Sabbath as an opportunity to pray and to study, to relearn the tradition after exile. Emphasis in religious gathering shifts to study and prayer, where the rabbi is the teacher.

In the gospel, we learn that Jesus, even prior to his public ministry, had followed this practice of gathering in community to pray and hear the Word of God in his own life: *He came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went **according to his custom** into the synagogue on the Sabbath day.* Luke mentions that he had already been going throughout Galilee, since his baptism, teaching in the synagogues. We do not know which Scriptures he read on those occasions, only that this day, in Nazareth, he reads from the prophet Isaiah, announcing his mission statement: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.* Followed by the shortest homily ever: *“Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.”* We do not know which Scripture passages Jesus read from in the other synagogues of Galilee. Maybe this same one or maybe some Scripture about the beauty of creation, or the mercy of God, or some other treasures. But since we do know about this one, we want to take it and its challenging message to heart, to do what we can to bring about that Jubilee year, that perpetual Kingdom of God that Jesus describes, and apparently a joyful heart is part of that – Isaiah calls it *glad tidings*.

Paul picks up on Jesus & Isaiah’s challenging message of inclusion, to disregard differences in social status, ethnicity, all the ways we like to distinguish between ourselves, and that we use to discriminate. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians intersects with the Rule of Benedict when Paul writes: *If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy.* Benedict teaches in Chapter 34 Distribution of Goods According to Need that each one’s needs may differ but each gets what they need and *in this way all the members will be at peace.* As a monastery, as a church, as a neighborhood, a nation, a planet community, Jesus lays this challenge and this great gift before us each day – that we know and believe we are united by

His Spirit so joyfully take up the prayer and the work of Jesus' love for us, to make it present in our midst.