

It was most encouraging to hear an Anglican bishop speaking some gospel truths to power in Washington DC this past week. Her words were not exactly appreciated by the new president of the United States. No surprise there! I was suddenly reminded of the final sermon preached by Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador in 1980. While celebrating the Eucharist he was shot dead by an assassin on behalf of the military junta after he had appealed to them in his homily for justice, for mercy, for an end to the oppression of the people of that land. He began by saying, 'Let no one be offended because we use the divine words read at our Mass to shed light on the social, political and economic situation of our people. Not to do so would be un-Christian. Christ desires to unite himself with humanity, so that the light he brings from God might become life for nations and individuals.' Later, addressing his words directly to the dictatorial regime, he said, 'The Church preaches your liberation, just as we have studied it in the holy Bible today. It is a liberation that has, above all else, respect for the dignity of the person, hope for humanity's good, and the transcendence that looks before all to God and only from God derives its hope and its strength.'

Today's readings have a major focus on hearing the word of God so that it penetrates the heart, informs our conscience, and leads us forward on the path which, through our Baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have been called to follow.

In today's first reading we met Ezra, the scribe-priest, reading and expounding the Torah, the Law of Moses. It appears that most of the people had forgotten or no longer understood the ancient Hebrew texts after the long years spent in exile in a foreign land, but they were now anxious learn and hear again the foundational scriptures of their people.

The Torah or Law of Moses, the first five books of the Bible, has much to teach us, but it is not easy to apply much of it to life today, nor should we try. Jesus went to the heart of the Torah when he said that we should love God with all our heart and our neighbour as ourselves, for on this all the law and the prophets depend. With this law, properly followed, all the essential commandments would be maintained, and others can be noted but mostly recognised as time and culture conditioned rules and norms that hardly make sense to life today. But in our Christian life today, we also need to be able to

distinguish what is of God, of the Spirit, of the gospel, and what is simply cultural, conventional, and what most people for most of the time take for granted. We must then decide which of these ways of life we wish to follow.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus takes on the role of the anointed servant of God for himself as he reads from the Isaiah prophecies about setting free those who suffer from oppression. He concludes by saying, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' With these words, he outlines the main thrust of his mission programme. He has come to make God's liberating love real in the here and now, today. He has come to bring hope and encouragement to people, especially the poor and the powerless. He has come to demonstrate it by words and acts of forgiveness, restoration, healing; he has come to give freedom to those in captivity of body, mind and spirit. His words have both a personal and a political meaning.

The life and ministry of Jesus was the decisive moment in God's dealings with humanity. It was the year of the Lord's favour, and it is a continuing year. God's good news of love and deliverance in Christ is still here for us in our today. And Jesus' use of the word 'today' should also influence our own discipleship. This passage is not simply about the historical mission of Jesus for our information. If we are following him, his words are for us to embrace, to practice, to live by, today.

We have been baptized in his name, anointed by the Spirit of God to make us 'Christ-ones,' Christians, those whose lives have been 'Christ-ened,' so that through us, Jesus can continue to walk this earth in visible human form. As St Paul reminds us in our second reading, 'Christ's body is yourselves, each of you with a part to play in the whole.' The Spirit has come to equip us with a variety of ministries and gifts within the Church. All of us have a calling and a role in making Christ known and present in the world and to the people of today. And the reading finishes with Paul about to tell us about the greatest gift of God that each one of us must embrace and share, and that is love, a love that grows to be complete and unconditional.

As we read the scriptures, particularly about the saving work of God in Jesus Christ, we should be inspired by these stories of God's saving love which come to us from the past. But most of all, we need to grasp the significance of them

for us today, now, the present moment, and how they call us to demonstrate the good news of God, and God's wish for a better, freer, a more just and compassionate world.

It is simply not enough for us to read or listen to the word of God in the scriptures. Like Jesus, like all who are recognised as his saints, we must let it flow into our hearts so that it comes to life, becomes flesh and blood, in our lives today.

There are plenty of oppressed, depressed, lonely, and marginalised people today whom Jesus is calling us to love as much as we love ourselves and those near and dear to us. With his sure help, may we too *be* and bring good news to the poor, in whatever form their poverty or captivity is suffered. May we give sight to the blind and help to release those in captivity, in whatever forms these conditions take. May we pray and work for all to enjoy liberation, healing, salvation. This is what faithful, discerning reading of the scriptures inspires us to do, and it is the way of life and love that we signed up to in becoming followers of Jesus Christ.