

Third Sunday Ordinary Time
January 23-24, 2016

Today is holy to our God.

Readings: Nehemiah 8:2-6,8-10; 1 Cor. 12:12-30; Luke 1:1-4;4:14-21

I do not think it an exaggeration to say that just about every family has a keeper of the history, that person most interested in keeping often scattered relatives in contact, whether by means of reunions, or in today's world, keeping them connected to their roots through the means of modern technology.

This Sunday is the only time during the three year-cycle in which we hear from Nehemiah. He was the Jewish governor of the province of Judah, then part of the Persian Empire. He was a man of action who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and introduced necessary administrative reforms, and this is his first person memoir.¹

The events described take place in the 5th century before Jesus and today we hear all about a priest named Ezra. He had gathered the whole community to listen to the reading of the Torah, and offered an official interpretation of it in the spirit of Moses. It stands to each generation to assimilate, interpret and make present and understandable the sacred truths of our faith.

It fell to Ezra the scribe to restore the religious life of the people in Jerusalem and Judah. One of his first acts was to get the people to renew the covenant made seven centuries earlier and also to dedicate themselves to God's service. The people needed to realize that all their future hopes depended on God alone.

In our own time, we must speak the saving truth of Christ to each new generation, while respecting the good work and faith of all who have gone before us in faith. Two and a half millennia after these events described, we too are called to find our home that the Lord has prepared for us.

¹ Introduction to the Book of Nehemiah, New American Bible.

“Do not be sad, and do not weep.” Ezra and Nehemiah were signs of hope in the midst of turmoil. The people knew that the Law had not been kept faithfully. So, yes there needed to be repentance, but at the end of the day there must also be hope in the future.

This past Friday, our Cathedral was standing room only as people came from all across our state to give witness to the sanctity of human life. Many of them were young people. It is sobering to note that I remember distinctly when *Roe v. Wade* became the law of the land. I may have been just nine years old at the time, but I remember enough to know that something very tragic had happened and it had to do with babies and human life.

That so many young people gathered here on Friday is a testament that there have been courageous people who have maintained the tradition, passing along to a new generation a powerful witness to the sanctity of human life. The Gospel reading today calls us to advocate for those most in need, for God has sent us “*to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.*” This most certainly applies to the most vulnerable in our society, the unborn child.

The Spirit of the Lord, our Advocate in heaven, empowers us to be advocates for these lives. That advocacy is seen in the wide variety of activities gathered under the umbrella of the pro-life movement. St. Paul reminds us of the diversity of the one Body of Christ in our second reading, a diversity driven by the same Spirit who is “Father of the poor,” and which seeks the same ultimate goal.

We must also be clear that while we are uncompromising with respect to life, we also see that a constitutive component of our faith is our equal witness to God’s mercy. The Jubilee Year of Mercy is a powerful sign of God’s love for any who have made these tragic choices or encouraged others to do so.

Mercy is never opposed to truth and keeping alive the vision of a world in which innocent life is protected must remain our goal. If we stop giving visible witness, we quickly lose sight of the goal. If we are to see progress with respect to our nation's laws, I am more and more convinced it will be due to our love.

Simply put, we must love more authentically, more visibly, and more sacrificially than we are doing now in order to win hearts. And for that love to grow, we must pass it along to the next generation. Do not fear the ridicule you will receive when standing up for life. Do not fear the misunderstanding when some will accuse you of disrespect for women or for freedom. Do not believe it.

I most heartily encourage you to think about setting aside Fridays as a day of abstinence from meat products, not just during Lent, but all throughout the year, and to do so in honor of your witness to life.

Notwithstanding the sins of the past, in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Lord led the people back to their homeland once more. He will do so once again.

Tradition is a living tradition. As our Catechism teaches:

Through Tradition, 'the Church, in her doctrine, life, and worship perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes.'²

This is our duty; this is our call. Each one of us plays a role in transmitting all that we are, all that we believe to the next generation. May we hold fast to the belief that God, who has begun the good work in us, will by his grace bring it to fulfillment and completion.

² cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph #78, referencing Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, "The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," paragraph 8.1