

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Power and Light District is a popular gathering point for crowds to celebrate important civic events such as the achievements of local sports teams. The Plaza gathers thousands of Kansas Citians on Thanksgiving night to open the holiday season that unites families around meals and gifts.

Imagine an entire city gathered in a public square for a different purpose: the proclamation of a passage from the bible. The mayor appoints a person to read. Carpenters have built an elevated wooden podium. As dawn breaks, men, women and children fill the square. The reader holds up the bible for all to see. Everyone stands. The reader praises God. The people raise their hands and shout “Amen, amen!” They bow before the Word of God, putting their faces toward the ground out of respect. The reader proclaims the Word for about six hours and then commands everyone to go home to celebrate, eat and rejoice in the Lord.

That is the scene Nehemiah describes in today’s first reading, reporting an event from the mid-fifth century BC in Jerusalem, where he had returned to rebuild the walls and improve the social conditions of the people. Nehemiah describes the event in such detail that we may not immediately notice what is missing. He never tells us what the reader read—which chapters of which book of what we now call the Old Testament. We don’t know. Nehemiah wanted us to notice how people respected the Word of God, not its message.

Those rituals influenced the reading of scripture in synagogue services and in Christian worship. For us Catholics, whenever a bishop dedicates a newly constructed church, this is always the first reading, the first proclamation that dedicates the new ambo for its sacred purpose as the unique place from which the people will hear the Word of God.

We also hear today the opening of Luke’s gospel and the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. He goes to a synagogue. He opens a scroll. We know what he read: a passage from Isaiah that invites respect for the Word of God and signals the way that Jesus will bring that Word into his ministry. He will bring glad tidings to the poor, proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed. He will rebuild the walls of faith and address the social conditions of the people.

Recent days have focused our attention on these needs. We remembered Dr. Martin Luther King and Sidney Poitier, champions of social justice. We learned of an armed man holding hostage innocent Jews in a Texas synagogue. We recalled the anniversary of the Supreme Court decision that expanded the practice of aborting children in the United States. We need the bible to guide us.

Imagine the entire city gathered at the Power and Light district or the Plaza to listen to the few verses of the gospel we heard today. You might think that’s an impossible dream, but it is happening in smaller assemblies all over the world where Catholics and other Christians meet for Sunday worship, stand to hear God’s Word, acclaim “Amen”, and listen for ways to address the social concerns of the people. The Catholic Church recognizes this Third Sunday in Ordinary Time as the Sunday of the Word of God. We can best honor that Word by giving it our full attention every time it is proclaimed, and living what it demands every day.

Sunday, January 23, 2022