

**Sermon for Epiphany 4, 27 January 2013, St James, Cambridge**  
**The Revd. Geoffrey Howard**

**Lectionary Readings:**

Nehemiah 8.1-3,5-6, 8-10

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12.12-31a

Luke 4.14-21

Our readings this morning are principally concerned with two themes: Holy Scripture and community.

The Jewish people at the time of Nehemiah was a broken and divided community. Many of them had been exiles in Babylon for a whole generation, some would have been born in Babylon and never seen the country of their fathers, others had continued to live in the ruined city of Jerusalem. The solution Ezra and Nehemiah came up with was to read from their sacred books, to remind them of their history, of the events of the past that had moulded them into the people they had become, of the laws their fathers had obeyed and the God they had worshipped and to acquaint them again with the literature which had informed and formed them and their ancestors. These two great influences, its history and its literature, still bind a nation together. I fancy they have been powerful forces in creating the modern state of Israel, just as they were centuries before when the exiled Jews returned to their own land. A common history and a common language are powerful forces in forming a people into a community.

St Paul, writing to the less than perfect church at Corinth, reminded it that Christians are all one and all equal in Christ, he referred to some classic distinctions of his time – Jew and Greek; slave and free; man and woman and stated the principal that these distinctions were not God-given. In the Church these distinctions counted for nothing, all were equal in Christ. Centuries before racism, slavery and gender discrimination were outlawed in the Western world St Paul laid down the principles which our modern statute laws express. But there were other unique divisions in the Corinthian church. It was a charismatic church, one which prided itself on its spiritual gifts, especially that of speaking in tongues and prophesy. And it had fallen into the trap which many charismatic churches still fall into, that of believing

there are two kinds of Christian, those who have dramatic spiritual gifts and those who haven't. It was a deeply divided community. So Paul reminds them that they are all members of the same body. Some members might be more gifted and prominent than others just as the parts of a human body are, but each part was essential to the whole. Hurt one part and you hurt the whole. Stamp on my little toe and my whole body shudders with pain, and if I hurt others who are part of that body I also hurt myself. It also means that no part of the body is redundant. Each member has a part to play. There are no passengers in the Body of Christ. The Church in Paul's eyes was a community of co-operation not of conflict. Conflict within the Church made as much sense to Paul as the right hand fighting the left hand, or one eye attempting to blind the other.

In the Gospel we read the account of Jesus returning to his own community in Nazareth, there to preach his first sermon. His sermon, based on a text from the Book of Isaiah, is his manifesto, he proclaims his programme of pardon, healing and liberation. A programme which declares good news to the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed (and remember that the people he spoke to were under foreign domination and oppression). The year of Jubilee, of liberation, had come. The Messianic Age was imminent. We are later told, in a continuation of our gospel reading that his hearers responded first with enthusiasm, then with doubt and finally threatened our Lord with mob violence. Why? Because he said that these blessings would not be limited to the Jews but shared with the gentiles. The vice of spiritual, racial and gender superiority was not confined to the church at Corinth. It seems to be endemic in human nature.

So what has all this to say to us this morning.

First that we are a people of the Book. We are told that those who listened to Ezra read and interpret the law of God understood the reading. They listened with their minds and their hearts, they paid attention to what they heard. When our Lord, after reading the Scripture, sat down all eyes were upon him. The Scripture readings and their exposition are an important part of the service, reading, listening and preaching is not to be undertaken lightly. The psalmist declared that the law of the Lord is sweeter than honey and the honeycomb. God's word is to be tasted, savoured, enjoyed and acted on.

And we belong to a community where like the body there are many differences between us. Let those differences be a cause for dialogue rather than criticism and conflict. For instance, what Holy Scripture says to you and what it says to me may not be identical. How you interpret Scripture and how I interpret it may differ. But let's not finish up throwing texts at each other, let's make it an occasion for listening to each other. Especially let's listen to Jesus. Which may well prove to be an uncomfortable exercise. His words may challenge some of our most deeply held convictions and shake their very foundations, as it did with the people at Nazareth. Our Lord's manifesto is by extension the Church's manifesto also. One which it has often gloriously fulfilled, one which it has often grievously failed. But there is still time, God's Year of Jubilee is not over, the Church's task is still to proclaim the prophetic message of good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed. There will never be any shortage of tasks for willing hands and feet and hearts and minds in the Kingdom of God.