

3rd Sunday of the Year C 2010

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit (Lk. 4:14)

What does it mean to be a Christian? What constitutes the absolute superiority of the Christian faith, the Christian religion, to all other forms of faith and religion in human history? So relativistic have our western societies become in matters of truth, and above all in matters of religious truth, that even posing such a question today is seen as a form of religious intolerance and even religious bigotry. For huge numbers of people today, any claim to know the truth about God or about moral laws is nonsense, and this skepticism is deeply engrained in our contemporary culture. But Christian believers cannot avoid making this claim without surrendering their faith, for the one they believe in, Jesus Christ, made this claim about truth in the most dramatic way by stating not only that He knows the truth, but that He is the truth.

So then, we might say in answer to our two questions that what makes us Christians is our faith in Jesus Christ and the Gospel of truth; and what makes Christianity absolutely superior is that it actually possesses the truth absolutely, because it possesses God in the person of Jesus Christ, with Whom every baptized Christian is united in the most intimate way. Christianity is not just a religion. It is a most intimate form of communion between the Almighty God and the baptized who possess the Spirit of God – all of which takes place in Jesus Christ.

Israel was God's first chosen people, united to God by a covenant of law. We see that covenant described in today's first reading from Nehemiah, where, having returned from the 70 year exile in Babylon, the people renew the covenant of Sinai before Ezra the priest-scribe. They prostrate themselves before the Lord as a sign that they will obey the ordinances that are read to them in a way they can understand. But then we are told that "*all the people were weeping as they heard the words of the law.*" It is an interesting response, and we might wonder why they were weeping? Was it for joy that the covenant was now renewed and the temple reopened? But then why does Ezra tell them not to be sad, if these were tears of joy? Or was this weeping due to the memory of the infidelity of their ancestors that caused the exile and perhaps a fear they might not be able to be any more faithful to the law than the generations before them. Was not the history of the covenant in Israel a history of constant infidelity of the people to the law – indeed, as Paul says, was this long experience not meant to teach them precisely that the law was insufficient only because they were incapable of remaining faithful to it?

The great prophets had taught the people that when the Messiah would come, God would enable the people, at last, to be faithful by giving to them a share in His own Spirit. When they had received a share in His Spirit, which was not yet understood as the Holy Spirit, then

he would plant both the law and His Spirit in their hearts, and they would be able to fulfill the law as never before.

In today's Gospel, we are told that the messianic time foretold by the prophets has arrived. Jesus, we are told, returns to Galilee *in the power of the Spirit*. Then Jesus himself announces that Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in Him: *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.* The glad tidings Jesus brings to the poor, that is, the humble and simple believers, is that he has come to set them free, to bring *liberty to captives* and *to let the oppressed go free*. The liberty he speaks of is the power of the soul to choose good, and that power is the same Spirit who anointed Jesus. The oppression he speaks of, from which he will set them free, is the oppression of sin, infidelity to God and His Law, infidelity that always reduces man to a slave.

Jesus will enable the people of God, at last, to attain the maturity of freedom, and even more wonderfully the greatness of sons, liberated from the oppression that had made them slaves. He will do this by fulfilling the promise to give them a share in God's Spirit, Who is also His Spirit, the Holy Spirit. When he unites them to Himself, in Holy Baptism, He will communicate God's Spirit who makes us adopted children of the Father, and the Spirit will give us all the supernatural

graces necessary to fulfill the law of God from a filial love, the very love that Jesus pours into our hearts.

What a tremendous thing this profound union is between the baptized Christian and the Holy Trinity, which takes place in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christianity is a religion, but so much more than simply a religion as defined in this world. It is above all a real, ontological, communion of life and love between God and His people, a real mystical communion that makes the creature truly divine by grace, just as Jesus became truly human by the Incarnation.

Christianity also has a law, the law of Christ, but more importantly it possesses the Spirit of God who can empower each Christian to do the Father's will, just as Jesus did. It is superior to all other religions not only because it has its origin directly in God, in the Son made man, but also because the baptized are made divine by their intimate communion with the Son, in the Spirit. As Paul says:

For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit. ... Now you are Christ's body, and individually parts of it.

Surely, of all people, then, we Christians should follow the advice of Ezra to Israel when it was brought back from exile and renewed the Covenant. As we celebrate the Eucharist each Sunday and renew the Covenant with Jesus and deepen our communion with the Holy Trinity, Ezra says to us: *Today is holy to our LORD. Do not be saddened this day, for rejoicing in the LORD must be*

your strength!” We rejoice always in the Lord, because we are *in the Lord* by His grace. We too are a people who have returned from exile, exile in the world around us, to renew the Covenant with Jesus, to receive gifts of grace in His Spirit, to deepen our communion with the Holy Trinity, and to deepen our love and communion with all the members of Christ’s body which we call the Church. With his grace and His Spirit, we believe we can truly conquer all evil in our personal lives and project His goodness and His truth into our world. We can be faithful to God, at last, and thereby be of great spiritual assistance to our brothers and sisters who still live in darkness, who live in slavery to this world and its master. As an ancient Father once said, Christians truly are the soul of the world, the source of hope and salvation, of peace and true justice and freedom. Let us then turn to God with great confidence each day, and by his grace become what God wants us to be, and what the world around us so desperately needs us to be. The Lord be with you.