

EPIPHANY THREE, YEAR C, JANUARY 23, 2022

Many years ago when Mother Teresa was alive a Franciscan monk in Australia was assigned to be her guide and go to person when she visited New South Wales. He was so thrilled and excited at the prospect of being so close to this great woman, he dreamed of how much he would learn from her and what they would talk about. But during her visit, he became frustrated. Although he was constantly near her, the friar never had the opportunity to say one word to Mother Teresa. There were always other people for her to meet.

Finally, her tour was over, and she was due to fly to New Guinea. In desperation, the Franciscan friar spoke to Mother Teresa: If I pay my own fare to New Guinea, can I sit next to you on the plane so I can talk to you and learn from you? Mother Teresa looked at him and asked, "You have enough money to pay airfare to New Guinea?" Yes, he replied eagerly. "Then give that money to the poor," she said. "You'll learn more from that than anything I can tell you." Mother Teresa understood that Jesus' ministry was to the poor and she made it hers as well. She knew that they more than anyone else needed good news.

This story is a potent one because it speaks of the need to integrate the good news that Jesus spoke about in today's Gospel into our lives. It is not enough to discuss our beliefs, to know the words by heart and to quote them on occasion but to live them. Karen Armstrong in her book *The Case for God* points out that religion was not primarily what people thought but something they did. The truth was acquired by practical action. She goes on to say:

It is no use imagining that you will be able to drive a car if you simply read the manual or study the rules of the road. You cannot learn to dance, paint, or cook by perusing texts or recipes. The rules of a board game sound obscure, unnecessarily complicated, and dull until you start to play, and then everything falls into place.

For Mother Teresa her religion was not just something she talked about but it was an integral part of her life. Her ministry among the poor was something she did all the time, every hour of every day. She pointed out to the Franciscan monk that his belief needed to go beyond the discussion level and to be an integral part of his life.

It is with this understanding that we come to the story of Jesus in today's Gospel. Jesus goes to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth and opens up the scroll and reads Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus was announcing to the people in his hometown that God's spirit was in him and that Isaiah's promise was his to deliver. This was what his ministry was going to be and how he would live his whole life reaching out to the poor, to those who were captives by any means, to those who were oppressed in any way and to those who suffered blindness of any kind. His whole life would be about love and compassion. This passage encapsulated who he was and the meaning of his life.

When we hear this story, it is not just a story about Jesus talking to people of his time about who he was and how he was going to live his life. He was also telling them what their lives were to be. The first word Jesus said to the people in the synagogue after he read the scripture was "today". Today the scripture has been fulfilled. Not yesterday, not tomorrow but today? It's not just been fulfilled in him but to those listening that day and to all of us here. Jesus essentially told his friends, "Look around. See the Spirit of God at work, right here. Right now. God is with us. Just as God promised Moses at the burning bush, 'I will be with you.' So too, the ever active, ever loving, ever liberating, always present God is here with us. Now."

Yes, the Spirit was upon Jesus but it was also upon his friends and neighbors, too. And by emphasizing the word "today," Jesus transformed Isaiah's words and his prophecy, into a powerful invitation for the whole community to act on behalf of God's justice. The text might have read: Living in God's promise is not about yesterday. Nor is it about awaiting some distant Messiah and eternal life in the Kingdom of God. It is about NOW.

That same message is for us here today. Today means we have to stand up, shake the dust off, and do something. What if the release of the captives and the healing of the blind requires that we step out of the prison cells we erect around ourselves and open our eyes to really see all of our fellow human beings and their needs? It's one thing to hope for a better future. It's quite another to actually live in the present and make God's kingdom a reality now.

Especially at this time, being two years into a pandemic, we keep deferring to a future or past date as if the days we live in right now don't count as "real life." Our mantra has become "Real life will resume like it was before after the pandemic." Real life will resume when no one is afraid or concerned to go out or worship in person. Real life will happen when we can celebrate the Eucharist with both bread *and* wine and when we put away our masks for good. Real life will be what it was before the pandemic.

We do ourselves a disservice by not living in the present and embracing each day and the opportunities, even disappointments that cross our paths. The spirit of God is upon each one of us. How will we live into that? It's not as overwhelming as we think.

Helen Keller once said, "I am only one; but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but I still can do something. I will not refuse to do the something I can do." We need to realize that this way of life that we are presented with through the words and example of Jesus in the Gospel is not limited to grand gestures of humanitarian aid. Rather, it is to

be our way of life at all times, everyday and every hour of everyday. The majority of the time, it is in the smallest and most hidden ways that we live into the gospel. It is how we act throughout our everyday activities, at home, at work, in our gathering places, in our recreation and in all of our relationships.

During this season of Epiphany, we are invited again and again to look for signs and glimpses of God's transformative presence today. We are called to trust that even in the mundane day-to-day of life, God's today brims with the possibility of joy and hope. As Jesus said, today this promise has been fulfilled in our hearing. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Not yesterday, not tomorrow but Today. Amen