

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time + 26 Jan 2025+ Neh 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10; Lk 1:1-4, 4:14-21

On Oct. 16, 1978, the Polish Cardinal Karol Wojtyla was elected as Pope, now Saint, John Paul II--the first non-Italian pope in 456 years. John Paul had a deep love for Poland, and so one of his first desires as Pope was to make a visit to his homeland. But there was a big problem: the ruling Communists in Poland were dead set against the Catholic Church, and had no interest in allowing the Pope to visit. And yet because they did not want to come off as appearing afraid of the pope, they decided to allow him entrance.

The Communists did all that they could to negate any impact the papal visit might have on the nation, such as sending a directive to all school teachers that read (I quote): *"because of the activation of the Church in Poland, our activities designed to atheize the youth can not only diminish, but must intensely develop."* They feared that thousands of Poles would line the streets when their native son returned home. Instead, John Paul II was greeted by around 1 million people, cheering, singing, and throwing flowers for the Pope.

John Paul said an open-air Mass in Warsaw's Victory Square. In what some consider to be the greatest homily of his life, he proclaimed that the history of Poland could not be understood without reference to the Cross of Jesus Christ, in spite of the ruling Communist's brutal attempts to clear God out of the collective consciousness of the people. At the end of the homily, the crowd spontaneously cried out: *we want God! We want God!* The Polish people were reborn. About 12 years later, the communist regime collapsed.

Now I don't think we can fully realize just how difficult it was for the Catholics of Poland to hold on to their faith, when for over 50 years they had to suffer under two brutally atheistic regimes: Nazism, followed by Communism. But I think this moment when St. John Paul II used the power of the Word of God to reclaim Poland for Christ can help us understand 2 equally-powerful moments in history, when the People of God were reborn, so to speak: those that we heard about in our 1st reading and Gospel today.

In our 1st reading, the Jews have finally been allowed return to their homeland—to the Promised Land—after the Babylonian exile. But they return as lowly, downtrodden people. Their Temple has been destroyed, they have been without sacrifice for nearly 70 years, they have lost their Hebrew language, and perhaps worst of all, they have forgotten the Law. And yet, as enormous as the task that lies ahead seems to be, Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the governor rally the people to rebuild the Temple and recall the Law of God. And so we heard how Ezra calls for a kind of "penance service", and reads most of the day from the Law. As the people hear the Word of God proclaimed for perhaps the first time in decades, they weep for all they have lost, for shame at how they have strayed from God's Law, and perhaps even for joy at the chance of a new beginning in the Land. But most importantly, they also solemnly renew their Covenant with the Lord, raising their hands high, and cry out, "amen, amen!" To ratify this covenant renewal, Nehemiah and Ezra exhort the people: *today is holy to the Lord your God. Do not be sad, and do not weep, rather,*

go, eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks. And so the people of God here begin anew, regaining their lost identity by listening to the Word of God, and then, by eating a sacred meal on a day Holy to the Lord. This is a clear foreshadowing of the Mass, where we too recommit ourselves to the Lord, as we listen to His Word, eat His body and drink His blood, and then give our own assent to this Covenant renewal: *amen!*

Moving on to our Gospel, we hear about the descendants of the returned Exiles, who were once again gathered to hear the Word of God, roughly 500 years later. The faithful Jews knew that the source of their identity was the Word of God, and so Sabbath after Sabbath they gathered to read from the Law and the Prophets. Each time they were read, the People would long for their fulfillment: for the promised Messiah—the Savior to come and defeat their enemies, and to restore the reign of the House of David.

Jesus was born into this sacred Tradition, which is why he *went according to his custom into the synagogue on the Sabbath day.* But on this day, everything changed. Jesus is handed the scroll, and He reads from what we know as chapter 61 from the Prophet Isaiah. He seemed to know exactly which passage He wanted to proclaim. And then in the biggest ‘mic-drop moment’ in human history He says: *today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing!* Could it really be true? Had the time of fulfillment really come? We cannot overestimate how daring a claim Jesus is making here: if Jesus truly is who He is claiming to be here, then the promises of the Old Covenant have been kept, and God has come to save His people!

Now if you read on in Luke chapter 4, you will find that this history-changing moment that should have been cause for the greatest rejoicing in Israel was met with great skepticism. Some believed, many did not. It’s no different today. So was Jesus telling the truth? Well, let’s look at that passage from Isaiah again: *The Spirit of the Lord...has anointed me...to bring glad tidings to the poor.* Two Sundays ago, we heard the Gospel of the baptism of Jesus, where He was *anointed by the Holy Spirit in bodily form like a dove.* So that anointing, we hear, was *to bring glad tidings to the poor.* The Greek word for *glad tidings* here is *euangelizo*—from which we get the word *evangelize.* And what is the content of this good news? *Liberty to captives. Sight to the blind. Letting the oppressed go free.* Now certainly Jesus will do this in a real, physical way, healing the sick, the blind and the lame. But these physical healings were only *signs* pointing to a deeper healing, a deeper liberation.

More than anything, sin robs us of hope, enslaves us, blinds our spiritual vision. Sin *oppresses* us every moment of our lives. So Jesus heals people physically because He is proving that if He has power over the effects of sin—human suffering—then He certainly has the power to forgive it! Forgiveness, then, is true liberation. And if only God can forgive sins, then Jesus is truly *Emmanuel*, God with us! And that is why Jesus is not a liar: He really has fulfilled all the promises of the Old Covenant, in a way we could scarcely dare to hope for. And if we believe this is true, then we too will be made a new people. And we will see the power of His Word *fulfilled in our hearing.*