

WORDS WITH POWER

Epiphany 3 – Cycle C: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-21

A year before he died, Canadian author and teacher Northrop Frye published what he called his “second study of the Bible and literature.” He entitled the book *Words with Power*, recognizing the authority both the Bible and literature have through borrowing from one another and through developing familiar themes, symbols, traditional sequences, and myths. What is certainly true is that Northrop Frye himself fell under the power of words: he loved literature, both biblical and otherwise, and taught his students the art of literary criticism so that they, too, might love prose and poetry, story and myth as he did; so that they, too, might better understand the mystery of our relationship with words. We are what we write; and, depending on the content and how we make use of it, it can be said that we are what we read. Words do have power over us, be they written or spoken; and when we write or speak, we can access for ourselves the power words have. With mere words, we can create, change, persuade, control, relieve, disarm, explain, analyze, determine, accuse, forgive, and mediate. What fascinates me in this age of unprecedented ability to communicate through new technologies is that so little attention, it seems, is paid to the art of writing and speaking; to the pursuit of eloquence, rhetoric, and wit which the new technologies are so deftly equipped to serve. We notice when a public figure speaks well or an author writes well; when people can say what they mean with clarity and effectiveness.

What two of this morning’s readings reveal is that the words of Holy Scripture had power long before Northrop Frye described how they receive their power and authority. In fact, Nehemiah’s account of Ezra’s public reading of the first five books of the Bible, approximately 445 years before Christ’s birth, is believed to be the beginning of including the reading of Scripture in corporate worship; giving the public reading of holy texts a central place in the spiritual formation of the people of God. It is hard for us to imagine Christian worship apart from the tradition of proclamation and interpretation of God’s Word as recorded in Holy Scripture. Christians, especially, identify themselves as people of the Word. Neil Alexander, one of my seminary professors, used to describe the Judaeo-Christian tradition as, essentially, a tradition of people and texts. I can remember being shocked at hearing the richness of our faith tradition reduced to just two words; but since then, his observation has become an important tool for me in understanding who we are as people of faith; how we come to faith; and how the Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies a religious community. When the Word of God lives among us, when we become what we hear and read, when the Word takes flesh in us, our life together, our spiritual formation, is a record of people and texts; a history of words and their power.

It was during the Babylonian Exile that the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, the “book of the law of Moses” as it is described in today’s First Reading, were assembled and edited. The exile itself suggested that the oral tradition and ritual worship might not sustain its power among the Hebrew people, especially in the hostile environment of Babylon and the other parts of the dispersion of the Jews. And so, a written record was undertaken of the great and mighty acts of God on behalf of the Hebrew people: the story of Abraham’s call and testing; the story of Isaac’s family and Jacob’s struggles; the story of Joseph’s unlikely rise to power in Egypt and the migration of the Hebrew people to Egypt during the years of devastating famine in the region; the story of how, with a change of Pharaoh, the Hebrew people were oppressed because they had become a force to be reckoned with in Egypt; the call of Moses, and the story of how Moses led Israel out of Egypt, first into the wilderness for further testing, and then into Canaan, the land of milk and honey. The stories were written down for the encouragement and affirmation of a people who, when they returned to their homeland when the Persians liberated them from Babylon, had lost so much. And so, when we hear in this morning’s First Reading that “all the people wept when they heard the words of the law” it was as if they were hearing for the first time their history as the people of a saving, redeeming, rescuing, loving, forgiving God who would stop at nothing to bless and preserve them. Within the few hours of Ezra’s reading and translating and interpreting, they received back their memory and identity as a people called and forgiven and called again through these incredible words with power. The people were overcome with all that had happened, including the present restoration of Jerusalem under Nehemiah. And so, Ezra has to say to them, “Do not mourn or weep...Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine.” And he includes in his dismissal something we readily identify as a core value of life with the God of the ancestors – the call to justice. Ezra says to the people, “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is

prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord...the joy of the Lord is your strength.” No one is to go hungry: when justice is done, God’s love is complete and God’s will is done. These, too, are words with power.

And it is no accident that a similar message, this one from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, sets the agenda for Jesus’ mission and ministry, as recorded in today’s Gospel. Luke tells us that Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth to begin his ministry and set the coordinates. “He went to the synagogue on the sabbath day,” Luke writes. “He stood up to read [from]...the scroll of the prophet Isaiah ...and found the place where it was written: ‘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 bring 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 favour...’ 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.’”

The power Jesus’ words had, we shall read next Sunday, cut both ways. Initially, the people in the congregation were “amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” But as he developed the great need for justice and how justice had been thwarted by so many of the ancestors, the people turned on Jesus. Good news became bad news, and they wanted to do nothing other than kill him.

Later in Luke’s gospel, Jesus will again reveal the challenge God’s good news, God’s Word, has in a world that is governed by injustice and prejudice; in a world that permits oppression and poverty and discrimination; in a world that condones retaliation and punishing. Jesus says to his followers, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

Words can create all of this disharmony – words with the power to call people to action on behalf of justice.

What is so wonderful and what is so terrifying in the Word of God is precisely its call to justice. I cannot think of any point in the Christian scriptures that warms my heart more than Jesus’ taking for himself and his followers the liberating words of Isaiah. But doing justice, having Jesus’ words take flesh in us, is nothing trivial. The Word of God’s power is counter to human nature, and as such requires our commitment, our hard work, our love, and a single-mindedness that may well alienate us from friends and family, classmates and co-workers. There is a high cost to discipleship. Walking the way of the cross with Jesus is not a walk down Bay Street in Toronto or Wall Street in New York. It is not the walk to celebrity or the walk to popularity. But it is the walk of righteousness and it blesses the many, not just the few.

Ezra leaves us this morning with one final word with power: he reminds the people assembled at the Water Gate outside the temple in Jerusalem, “the joy of the Lord is [our] strength.” May this word have power in our mission and ministry!