

**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
January 24, 2010  
10 am**

**J.A. Loftus, S.J.**

**Mary Oliver has a poem called “Pretty Song” in which, speaking of her own life and world, she writes: “This isn’t a playground, this is earth, our heaven, for a while.” Hold that thought for a minute.**

**Our liturgical bounty overflows this morning. We have not one, or even two, but three readings of remarkable depth, insight and beauty. Each in its own way is a poignant and moving piece of a much larger picture. Each reading is like a tessera in a mosaic (that’s one single piece, usually a cube of tile, that fits into a much larger picture). And our three readings today describe pieces of the largest mosaic of all: the mosaic of God’s unfathomable love for God’s people and God’s Promise to remain with us always.**

**The problem for a preacher is, of course, the problem of time. You would not be as patient, I fear, as Ezra’s audience. And if I had to preach in my usual homiletic style, I would put Ezra to shame. He only spoke to his people from dawn to mid-day. We could be here for days! So I will not tax your patience. Let me simply try to place a lamp-post above each reading and let each speak for itself to our hearts.**

**The first lamp-post is just a context for the Book of Nehemiah. Five**

**hundred years before Christ, the Israelites have their sacred city destroyed, Solomon's Temple left in ashes, and those who are not slaughtered outright, are carried off to Babylon as captives. They are all exiles, refugees and they languish there for well over 50 years. Most have lost their language, their culture, and their religion. God is nowhere to be seen. They are exiles from all that they cherished—for years on end.**

**Finally Babylon itself is toppled and the new King Cyrus releases the few thousand Israelites who desire to try to re-build their lives. With Ezra, their leading scribe, teacher, and priest, they trek for months through the barren desert in caravans back toward where they remembered Jerusalem to be. (Some of the most beautiful poetic prophecies and songs in the Bible come from this period of Israel's history. "By the waters of Babylon we sat and wept." This is the time of Isaiah's greatest poetry as well—and we will hear some of that poetry in the Gospel reading today.)**

**By the year 518 or so, Ezra has finally re-built the walls of the city and erected the beginnings of a new temple. And today he gathers all the people by the walls of the new city, stands on an elevated platform, and reads carefully and slowly—for the first time in ages, and in a language most no longer understood, Hebrew—he reads the words of God's Promise. It is *Torah***

he reads, not just the commands of the law. (That would hardly take all morning.) No, he reads again the everlasting Promise of the God who—despite all appearances to the contrary—will never abandon them. And the people weep—but only sometimes for joy.

It must be hard even today to read these words in modern Jerusalem. Not to mention in Haiti, or Afghanistan, or Iraq. This is my Promise: I will never desert you. And a new era has begun for Israel. In the dim light of the lamp-post, and thousands of years later, can we just let the reading speak quietly to our hearts when we've felt, or feel, abandoned?

And the lamp-post for our Gospel. Five hundred years later, another Jewish man enters a synagogue and he, too, unfolds a papyrus and stands before the people to read. His words come from Isaiah; the Promise is the same, but this man has the audacity to suggest—no to say bluntly—today this Promise is fulfilled as you listen. As you listen! As *we* listen!

Liberty is proclaimed to all who are imprisoned, however they are imprisoned. The blind can see again. The oppressed are set free. And the poor realize their wealth. This is also the beginning of a new era for Israel. But this time it is a new era for far more than just Israel. It is for everyone! But the people still wait to see more for themselves. (We'll hear that in next

week's gospel passage.) Most wait. And they hope...but....

Jesus certainly did all he could to fulfill that Promise in their sight. He fulfilled it in his own flesh and with his own blood. But it is not a completely finished Promise. The people still wait.

And now there is the latest reading—chronologically speaking—our second reading. St. Paul, writing now only a few years after this gospel reading takes place, completes the picture of God's Promise. Our third lamp-post is as bright as we can expect. Paul realizes that the Promise of God is still incomplete in his world only because the Body of Christ is still working, laboring, weeping, waiting, and building itself up. This lamp-post forces us, I'm afraid, to look at each other—right now, right here.

St. Paul does not use the language of simile, or even of metaphor. He speaks not symbolically but ontologically. "You are the Body of Christ." You! And we are all parts of a single Body, no one part worth any less than any other. No one part any less useful or needed. If and when one part malfunctions, the whole suffers. (Just think of your last toothache.) We are not symbolically linked in some vague, mystical way. We *are* the Body of Christ! Literally. And God's great Promise now awaits our labor in love—for each other. And so our own world still waits for us as well.

**“This is not a playground, this is earth, our heaven, for a while.”**

**Ezra wins by several hours. But I hope the lamp-posts invite each of us to weep when we need to, to wait when we must, but to be always who we truly are—the Body of Christ—in ourselves, for each other, and for our world. Truly, this is not just a playground.**