Living a life anointed by the Spirit of grace

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Epiphany + 3 – Neh 8 1-3, 5-6, 8-10, Ps 19, 1 Cor 12 12-31, Lk 4 14-21

Children: Do you have a family story – a story that tells you where your grandparents and their grandparents came from, and why you live where you do now? What if you didn’t have your story? I’d feel like I didn’t belong; I’d feel lost. In today’s first reading (from Nehemiah) we’ll meet people who feel lost. They’ve come back from exile. Exile means being sent away from home and forced to stay there – sometimes for your whole life. These people’s parents had been born in exile. And over that long time, they’d lost their story – the story that could tell them who they were; God’s people. That’s why they felt lost.

2 Kings 22 tells us how a scroll containing that story was rediscovered during rebuilding work; a scroll of the first five books of our Bible. Those books tell their true story; the story of where they come from and who they are. And today we hear how the priest Ezra gathers the people and reads out their story to them, explaining the tricky bits as he reads. And as they hear their story, they learn that they are God’s people, who are called to give God’s blessing to every family of the Earth.

In today’s Gospel story we’ll hear how Jesus returns to the village of his childhood, and he goes to Synagogue – which is like our Church. Every week there, they read from the scroll of the Law, like Ezra did, and explain the tricky bits. Then it’s time for a reading from the prophets – prophets are people who remind us to keep our promises to God. Jesus stands

up to read, and they give him the Isaiah scroll. Jesus finds the part we know as chapter 61. And as he reads it out, he changes it a bit. He leaves out the bit about vengeance, and adds a bit about recovery of sight to the blind. He adds bits about about poor people and blind people, but he leaves out the bit about revenge or judgement.

He tells them this is his story. We are followers of Jesus, and we tell his story today because it's our story – so we know who we are, who we belong to. We learn it so we can give this story to people who need a kind, hopeful story of their own. Can you think of anyone who needs a story like that? Let's listen.

Sermon. We're most fully ourselves when we are connected – when we're part of a shared story of God's extravagant generosity. Today we heard Ezra tell the returned exiles: this is your story and it's a story to be shared in word and action most particularly with those who have nothing to give back. We're shown what this means for us when Jesus stands up in the synagogue and declares his commitment to the poor, to captives to the blind and oppressed. We are shown what this means for us when Jesus lives this story and dies to bless poor, blind, oppressed captives.

The Christian life can only be lived out in relationship; in community; in care and compassion. And central to the way we live it out is a shared commitment to the poor, to the weak and the marginalized. It's not the work of a moment, neither is it the work of momentary grand gestures and inspiring events; though they may sometimes happen. The Christian life is lived out by ordinary people like us who can grow in our sense of belonging, care and inclusion. It's simple, and lovely.

As we think about the handing on of stories, we remember that our children soon return to school. Can we see their return in a new way? Education is the sacred responsibility of each

generation – handing on the story of how we've become who we are. Our children learn how and why they belong; they discover what gifts they have, and become equipped to care for their community when they become adults. Here, we seek to do that handing on of the story in the kids' corner, and we are partners with other groups who seek to do it with us in the wider community – SJYS, Dulwich, MM, SLWS – partners honouring this co-missioning we share.

We call our community the body of Christ, so we seek to live a life modelled on his life; a life anointed by the Spirit of grace – not vengeance or judgement – grace; to proclaim good news; grace to offer this story to people who might have lost theirs; grace to release people from the prison of isolation; grace to offer Jesus' vision to people who see no purpose, grace to offer release to people from the slaveries of our age. Jesus has this day declared free belonging and gracious purpose in this mission statement. It is his mission, and so it is ours. Amen