

Recently one of the members of our confirmation class asked me, "How do we know that Jesus actually lived? Is there proof?"

You know, our proof of him is the witness of people who told his stories and then wrote them down, recorded them for us in the books of the New Testament of the Bible. The written word of Holy Scripture is how we know he lived among us as one of us, and was, at the same time, God's own Son.

In Jesus' time the "proof" of God, the stories of the people's experience of God, was written in the scrolls of the temple. They recorded the story of the Hebrew people, led by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob into covenant with God, later delivered by God out of Egypt with Moses in the lead, wandering in the wilderness, then reaching the promised land but later taken away into captivity by their enemies.

The voices of the prophets, Nehemiah among them, recorded the return of the Israelites to their homeland and the constant need of the people to remember their covenant with God.

It's from one of these books, the book of the prophet Isaiah, that Jesus himself reads in this morning's gospel. He has just been baptized by John the Baptist in the river Jordan. He has resisted the temptations of Satan in the wilderness. He will not use his power for his own sake.

Now the news that he's back from the desert has spread throughout the land and he has gained notoriety as a teacher in many of the neighboring synagogues.

In this passage he's in his hometown and he enters the synagogue where he grew up. The people here have known him since he was a child. The attendant hands the scroll to him. Jesus stands and chooses the passage he will read. All eyes are on him.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," he says, and "I am the fulfillment of these words. I am the one who comes in the name of God." And these words that the people have heard so many times before, that Jesus himself has read so many times before, suddenly take on an entirely new meaning. They may have been just words before, read as if by rote, but today they have been fulfilled as he reads and they hear.

A very similar thing can happen to us in our worship, as the power of the Holy Spirit permits us to hear the very familiar words of Holy Scripture suddenly in a wholly new way. It may be in saying together the Psalm for the day or hearing a passage from the Old or New Testament. Suddenly we hear the old familiar words in a way we never have before.

It's as though the words may have no power for us one day and the next day Jesus himself has opened the scroll and is reading directly to you and to me. The hearing may even make us weep. That's what happened in the time of the prophet Nehemiah, in the OT reading we heard first this morning.

Ezra the priest brought the book of the Law of Moses before the people, the people who had just found their way back to Jerusalem after years in exile. He brought them together in the city of their ruined temple and began reading to them the familiar words of God's law.

They had been away for so long that some needed translators so they could understand. Many were generations removed from hearing this language yet they knew this was home and the law was home and the people wept.

When they heard these words at this time in their lives it had new meaning. It must have been for them as though Moses himself was standing there reading it to them.

When we bring the truth of our lives to worship, the joys as well as the sorrows, our worries, our guilt, our pain, all that's real, then what we hear in the readings from Holy Scripture may be all about us. When we can say, "this passage is about my life," the words have new meaning for us. We hear them as speaking directly to each of us. It's as though Jesus were standing here himself reading this just for me, just for you.

And this makes the case for being a faithful, practicing Christian community. It makes the case for exposing ourselves to the weekly – or even more often – reading of the Bible in the context of private prayer or public worship.

Because, although we may not always feel a reading deeply and it may not seem to apply directly to us at all, and it may not leave us weeping, at another time we may bring something to the reading, some life experience, that will make us realize that Jesus is speaking directly to us, proclaiming that he is anointed to bring good news to the poor, to release those who are captive, to bring sight to all who are blind, to free the oppressed. And suddenly we understand what he means in a new way, for our own lives.

Jesus speaks to us so often through what hurts us. It may be blindness. He brings sight to the blind. We are all blind to those things we don't want to see. It may be captivity. He brings release to the captive. We need to be set free from forces that grip us tightly sometimes. We need to be set free by God's forgiveness. We need the good news Jesus brings to the poor. He speaks to us in all kinds of poverty.

Jesus knows what hurts us and God has anointed him to come to us in our need.

There is a Hasidic tale about an elderly rabbi, renowned for his purity, who was unexpectedly approached by a youthful disciple. The impetuous seeker fell at the feet of the rabbi and exclaimed: "My Master, I love you!" The old teacher looked up from his books and asked the fervent disciple: "Do you know what hurts me, my son?"

The young man looked puzzled, but composed himself and replied: "I don't understand your question, rabbi. I am trying to tell you how much you mean to me, and you confuse me with irrelevant questions." The rabbi rejoined, "My question is neither confusing nor irrelevant, for if you do not know what hurts me, how can you truly love me?"

Jesus knows what hurts us and Jesus truly loves us.

He has the power to reach us through our practice of reading his word regularly. That's why, no matter what else we do as a community, it is vital that we always practice regular worship with regular reading of Holy Scripture and receiving the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Today Jesus himself may pick up the scroll and read directly to you and to me.  
Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria