

Gospel: Jesus returns to Nazareth for the first time since John the Baptist is arrested
Paul: the Body of Christ.

This morning we're going to begin with a little game of "Who said this": "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in..."? Abraham Lincoln

How about this: "In the swift rush of great events, we find ourselves groping to know the full sense and meaning of these times in which we live. In our quest of understanding, we beseech God's guidance. We summon all our knowledge of the past and we scan all signs of the future." Dwight D. Eisenhower.

And lastly, this: "...we have always understood that when times change, so must we; that fidelity to our founding principles requires new responses to new challenges; that preserving our individual freedoms ultimately requires collective action." Barack Obama.

Now, when – on what occasion – did they each say these things?

At their inaugurations. Lincoln's and Obama's second, Eisenhower's first.

Scholars say that there are common themes in most inaugural addresses: they seek to set the tone for the coming years, to lay out what will characterize those years, and to do so with broad brush strokes rather than through the minutiae of finely honed policy statements.

Lincoln's vision, with the Union forces stalled outside Richmond and Petersburg, was one of reconciliation; Eisenhower, facing "the Communist Threat" hoped to create a context that was future looking and peaceful, rather than being mired in the old responses that almost always involved violence; Obama sought to clarify the source of our nation's inspiration as the basis for our responses to a changing world.

An inauguration speech, done well, will tell you a lot about the speaker's vision and values. And an inauguration speech, done well, should leave little doubt of the speaker's vision and values. Of course, this doesn't mean all the speaker's listeners will agree! It was clear this week that some people loved what President Obama said, and others hated it; some completely agreed, others completely disagreed.

Which brings us to a gathering in a very small, almost completely insignificant little village somewhere in the northern Galilee region of the Roman province of Iudaea around 26 A.D., and to a religious service.

Who were the participants? The villagers, of course! There were maybe 40 dwellings in 1st Century Nazareth, making it a mere 'blip' on the Provincial map. No Roman would ever need, nor want to visit. It wasn't on any main road, so no Jewish city dweller would go there either. It would have been a "no-name" place for almost everyone but its inhabitants – and they were probably pretty happy with that! The old ways would go unchallenged, and they would distrust

anyone who proclaimed or represented newness, change, “newfangled ideas”!.

The “old ways” would have included a distrust of strangers, Jewish or not; a devout adherence to the Law of Moses combined with a willingness to circumvent it if possible; and the supreme value of family.

Into this arena comes a local boy who went off to follow a prophet. Jesus was almost certainly a follower of John the Baptist who, when John was arrested, saw that event as a sign from Yahweh that it was time for him to strike out on his own. Putting the various gospel narratives together it seems he went first to Capernaum – perhaps meeting with other followers of John to think about what to do next – and then, to Nazareth.

There were no newspapers in the 1st Century, let alone tweets! News was “word-of-mouth”, and in all likelihood news about John the Baptist would not have reached Nazareth. All the villagers would have known was this: our very smart brother Joshua is back from the Big City!

There must have been many questions! “What did you see and do?” “What did John preach about?” “Did he really eat locusts?”

When it came time for worship, it would have made complete sense to ask a follower of the great John the Baptizer to read and expound on scripture. For one thing, they’d learn a lot about who Jesus had become and what his plans were now. Would he choose some racy passage from the Song of Songs? Some dull, repetitious list from Nehemiah that would have them there all morning?

The answer is something short and sweet that begins with heart-stopping words: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me....”. That’s “messiah” language!

It’s “messiah” language, and it means that this short passage is Jesus’ inaugural speech; we would do well to remember that when he was asked to speak about his vision **this is what he said**, that God had chose him.....

".....to bring good news to the poor. ...to proclaim 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 favor."

God’s favor, freedom from everything that oppresses, insight into the heart of all that is, and forgiveness and restoration to wholeness of all that causes division...God’s favor, freedom, insight, forgiveness, restoration.

It’s hard not to like that list! In the verses beyond the end of today’s gospel, Jesus’ family, friends, and neighbors seem to have loved it... “

That’s a list for us, we who proclaim ourselves followers of this same Jesus: God’s invitation to us is to be individuals and part of a people who commit ourselves to a way of life that seeks to being freedom from everything that oppresses, that shares insight into the heart of all that is,

offers forgiveness and works for restoration.

We are beginning a new time here. New in the sense that you can read something of what our leadership hopes for in the coming year in an overview of our annual report; new in the sense that we have entered a new age without the person who stood as the symbol of the founding generation of this place.

There's newness all around. "We summon all our knowledge of the past and we scan all signs of the future" ... "fidelity to our founding principles requires new responses to new challenges."

And, in fact, all of today's readings offer us some founding principles: Nehemiah that our community identity must include all; Paul, that this identity is predicated on a radical equality where only functions differ, not the importance of those who fill them, and also that specific individuals are called to fulfil specific tasks; and Jesus that a community not committed to openness of inquiry, freedom from oppression, forgiveness and restoration is no community at all.

The future beckons us. Where, now, are we headed?