

The Third Week in Ordinary Time
January 24, 2016

One of the great baseball movies of all time was “The Natural” starring Robert Redford. In the movie, there is a scene where the team manager and his assistant are sitting in the dugout playing “Name that Tune” where you hear a few bars of a song and then try to guess the name of that particular tune.

Well, the beginning of each one of the four Gospels kind of works like that because if you hear just the first few words of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, you can know immediately not only what Gospel it is, but what the central theme of that particular Gospel is.

For example, the Gospel of Matthew starts with “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” From that one sentence, we know what comes after...that whole series of “Abraham became the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob...” and so on down to Joseph the husband of Mary.

But that first sentence also tells us something very important about how Matthew will highlight Jesus as the fulfillment of all of the promises God has made to His people beginning with Abraham.

Today, we heard the very beginning of the Gospel according to Luke. From the very first words, we can sense the distinctiveness of Luke’s Gospel. It seems much more personal. He’s addressing someone (or maybe even a group of people) called Theophilus, which means “friend of God”.

Luke wants to be sure that Theophilus knows the truth about things concerning the life and ministry of Jesus. For Theophilus and all the other Greek-speaking people for whom this Gospel was originally written, the word “truth” would mean, “having a deeper understanding”. And so, we can tell immediately that Luke’s Gospel is going to give us a deeper understanding of the meaning of Jesus mission.

We learn that too from today's Gospel reading. From the opening verses of Luke, our reading jumps past Luke's nativity story, past Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River and past his temptation in the desert to the beginning of His ministry in Galilee.

By the time Jesus arrives back at His hometown of Nazareth, we are told that Jesus is filled with the Spirit.

And it's from this Spirit that Jesus receives His mission from the Father...to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, to recover sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free.

The very same Spirit that came upon Jesus is the very same Spirit we share by virtue of our baptism into the body of Christ. As a result, we too share in the very same mission of Christ. We too are called to bring glad tidings to the poor.

But we should also know, especially after recent events that, as Catholic Americans, we have a long way to go in order to live in fulfillment of the scriptures.

Abortion, euthanasia, the degrading of marriage and dissolution of what we mean by the word "family" create a false morality that is ravaging our culture.

Freedom of choice has been changed to mean we have license to do what we feel like doing without paying attention to how those actions will affect the lives of others.

And that's why it was so vitally important that so many people, most of whom were under the age of 20, braved a winter storm and virtual absence of media attention to stand up for the rights of the unborn this week in Washington.

And while we give thanks to God for the witness of those who participated in the March for Life, all too many Americans are still of the opinion that our faith should have no bearing on our public activity, and that religion, politics, and the norms to which we should hold our public school teachers and elected public officials should be purely secular.

Of course Separation of Church and State is continually invoked. But it's a phrase that has been twisted into a new phrase; "separation of religion from society."

In the 1984 Supreme Court decision of *Lynch v Donnelly*, Chief Justice Warren E. Burger wrote: "The concept of a 'wall' of separation between church and state...is not an accurate description of the practical aspects of the relationship that in fact exists.

"The Constitution does not require complete separation of church and state; it affirmatively mandates accommodation, not merely tolerance, of all religions, and forbids hostility toward any."

So it's natural in this election year to ask whether separation of religion and morals from public life has in fact brought us to the moral crisis in which we presently find ourselves.

On the walls of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C. you'll find this quote: "God who gave us life gave us liberty.

"Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever."

The Spirit of the Lord was the power behind Jesus Christ's justice, vision, values, and everything He did to fulfill the words He spoke in today's Gospel.

That same Spirit of the Lord *is* upon us today and everyday. He has anointed us and given us His gifts of wisdom, understanding, knowledge, steadfastness, courage, and even joy.

The joy of the Gospel is always ours in Jesus. If we live as missionaries of mercy, we will know God's mercy in our own lives. If we liberate one another with forgiveness, we ourselves will be set free. Then we too will know God's favor and this New Year of 2016 can really become a Year of Favor from the Lord.