

Before the newness of the New Year wears off, I want to focus on new ways to renew our spiritual lives. I'll be unpacking today's readings and look at how we as individuals and as a community can grow closer to God and get his help to liberate us from sin.

Last year I asked my son if he could help me manage my retirement account. He has a minor in finance and his work makes him pretty qualified for this role. After completing the first year, we scheduled a zoom call to review things. He jokingly opened with, "So Mr. Kazmierowicz, what are your financial goals for the year..."

Just as we do this for our financial future, how much more important is it for our spiritual future? It's time to review and reflect, and look at the progress made last year. Do we feel a greater sense of peace in our lives? Consider any setbacks, are we slipping out of our habits of prayer and worship? Spiritual renewal is aimed at improving our relationship with God and finding and staying on our path to heaven.

Our 1st reading is a story of renewal from Nehemiah. Let's begin with some context, by looking at state of the Jewish people as they attempt to renew their lives and religious practices.

Prior to this reading, the walls of Jerusalem have been breached, and its gates gutted by fire. The city lacks protection from enemies and Nehemiah approaches the King of Persia for help. The King provides financial and security resources, and Nehemiah sets off to rebuild the walls and gates of the city. Through a two-and-a-half-year process of overcoming social and economic challenges, the community completes their renovations. A physical renewal of the city has been accomplished and in today's reading a spiritual renewal begins.

Ezra, a scribe and priest, mounts a platform built for the occasion, and for seven days he, "Reads out of the book (The Torah) from daybreak till midday, in the presence of the men, the women, and those children old enough to understand." After 80 years of exile, the Jewish community is hearing the words of the Law of Moses for the first time, and the people of Israel weep with joy. Their long awaited spiritual renewal has begun.

Even though only a handful of the people are literate, the spoken scripture is central to the lives of the ancient Jews, and we apply the same importance the Word of God in our Mass liturgy. Our readings are a source of spiritual renewal, when we combine them with personal reflection with communal worship.

We are blessed in this country to conduct religious gatherings, while in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa many governments forbid Christian worship, similar to the exiled Jews in the time of Nehemiah. We are here, in person, as the Body of Christ, and thank the Lord for our freedom of worship. We are also called to hold up in prayer those who suffer persecution.

As we move to the gospel reading, let's see how Jesus begins a new phase of renewal as he introduces Himself as the Son of God. After over 700 years of waiting, the Messiah announces himself, a man from the small town of Nazareth, and shocks the local community with His news.

The local rabi call Jesus a blasphemer, the Scribes and Pharisees see him as a threat, and most Jews are disappointed, expecting a mighty military leader to free them from Roman occupation.

But as we seek renewal this year, how do we receive Jesus, a man who is also God? Are we ready to fully accept Him as our savior and king? If, not, what is holding us back? If so, how will He lead us to salvation?

One place to start is the "Our Father," Jesus' answer to the question, "How shall we pray?" It ends with the words, "Deliver us from evil." In Spanish the words are, "Libranos del mal," or LIBERATE us from evil. Liberation is needed when we can't overcome spiritual obstacles on our own, and we need God's help. Our hearts can be like the conquered Jerusalem, with gates gutted by fire and lacking protection from the enemy. We ask God to come in like Nehemiah, help us overcome our spiritual challenges, rebuild our walls and gates to protect us from sin, and fill our hearts with His love.

Liberation is needed to overcome the bad habits and addictions that separate us from God. Our role in liberation is to open our hearts in humility and ask the Lord to remove any EVIL spirits from us and to fill us with His HOLY Spirit.

Liberation unites us as it did the Jews in the newly restored Jerusalem, as a people under one faith. Saint Paul reminds us in the second reading, "All the parts of the body, though many, are one body so also Christ. For in one spirit, we were all baptized into one body." So, St James is a community of believers joined through the one baptism.

And, just like the people of Jerusalem embraced the Word of God with their hands raised high, answering, "Amen, amen!" We too join our hands praising the Lord who liberates us from evil.

The words that follow the Lord's prayer at every mass, speak volumes about Jesus' plan for our salvation. The priest says, "Lord deliver us from evil, graciously grant peace in our days, that, by the help of your mercy, we may be free from sin and safe from all distress, as we await the blessed hope in the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ." And we raise our hands high and say, "for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen!"

As we continue our mass today, let's dig deep, plan our spiritual renewal for the year, think about our roles in all our faith communities, our family, our parish, and the greater Church. Let us welcome our Savior and King, let him liberate us from sin, and make us holy individually and as a community.