

# The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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The first time I traveled to the Holy Land I was a young seminary student. I lived and studied there for five months in a small village just outside of Jerusalem. Usually our classes were held in the mornings, and the afternoons were ours to use as we wished. Very often I would use that free time to take long walks by myself, through the hillsides and into the city streets, past vineyards and markets and neighborhoods. And for some reason I was frequently mistaken for a Jewish person while out walking, and it was not uncommon for drivers of cars to pull over and ask me—in Hebrew—for directions to where they were traveling. Sometimes pedestrians approached me for the same reason. Usually I didn't know. Sometimes I did know but didn't know how to speak what they needed to hear in their language. Sometimes they spoke English so I could tell them. Very rarely I surprised myself by stammering through enough Hebrew to help them. And every once in a while, by some sort of coincidence, I both understood where they wanted to go and offered to walk with them, so that even if there was a language barrier I could still be a servant to them on their journey. Those occasions always made me feel very satisfied, not only because I could assist them, but because I realized that in a place where I was a practically a stranger myself I had at least become familiar enough to have insight that a complete newcomer didn't have. There's also something pleasant that happens when you're able to accompany somebody in person rather than just giving them some information and hoping they remember it well enough.

That distinction between merely giving directions and actually going along with another person is also a helpful way for me to think about today's Sacred Scripture, particularly to distinguish our First Reading (from the Book of Nehemiah,) from the Gospel of Luke.

In Nehemiah we hear of a recitation of directions, specifically it is the story of Ezra the priest reading out from the Book of the Law of Moses. It was an event that took place hundreds of years after Moses had first received the Law from God on Mount Sinai. Ezra was reading to an audience that had been devastated by a military invasion of their sacred land and had been forced into exile. The Law was God's gift to his chosen people, the direction manual that provided all kinds of wise instruction about how to live well as a holy, happy, successful nation of believers. And most biblical scholars believe that the reason why all the people were weeping as they listened to Ezra was that they were realizing how far they had strayed from following the directions. The Book of the Law had been lost during the military conquest, and by the time it was rediscovered the Israelites had lost their way. Ezra's reading was a moment of very painful awakening to the fact that there was now a large gap between what the directions prescribed and what was the way they were actually going about their lives. That's what can happen when you don't know just where to go, and you make just one wrong turn in trying to follow the directions: Suddenly all the other directions become meaningless and only add to the confusion and misdirection. Without an actual guide there to help—or at least a guide book—it is easy to become disoriented and even panicked. So the audience of Ezra was crushed in grief, alarmed by their failure to be faithful. But in the midst of it, Ezra spoke only words of encouragement. Instead of being stuck in their disappointment, he told them to rejoice because they had recovered the direction book—the Law. The only thing worse than being lost is not being *aware* that you're lost. Now the people can at least hear and know the right way—and that is cause for celebration.

That's an experience to which we can all relate in one way or another. Hitting rock bottom can be a terrible upsetting moment—whether in relationship or in destructive behavior or in career ambitions or in personal goals. But it is also a moment of conversion and new beginnings if we are open and honest enough to welcome

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that. If Ezra's audience mourned their unfaithfulness, at least they could now begin to set things right. They had re-welcomed the proper directions, and so Ezra was right to tell them to party.

But even having the correct directions can still leave us wanting and vulnerable, in at least two ways. For one, we still have to be constantly on guard against misreading or misinterpreting the instructions. The right directions are still only as helpful as we are attentive to them and understanding of them. And the long history of religion ought to make us fairly humble in our claims to be wise about following directions. So should our present experience of the local archdiocese.

And for another, we can too easily trick ourselves into thinking that we have arrived at our goal just because we think we are in possession of good enough directions to get there. Those are not at all the same thing, which is why people of Christian faith can never be content to say that we *know* and *understand* how to live as God wishes. We actually have to *do* it.

And that is why having a real live guide and companion on the way is so vital...someone like Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit alive in the Christian community, who will not only tell us how to take the next step but who will actually accompany us as we move. That is a priceless gift, but it is also a weighty challenge. And nothing illustrates that more than the gospels of today and next weekend.

Today we hear of Jesus coming to the synagogue in Nazareth to participate in the traditions of worship in his boyhood hometown. And everything seems to be sweetness and light. Luke tells us that the whole region was glowing about Jesus and his reputation, that he was "praised by all." And when he stood up to read from the scroll, all were eager with anticipation. And then Jesus quoted from the Prophet Isaiah words that that the people had been hearing aloud for hundreds of years, words of direction—not of law but of prophesy, instructions on how to live and on how God would act. And who could object to the sentiments that Jesus read out? God speaks good news to the poor, freedom to prisoners, relief to the suffering. What's not to love? These are certainly the correct and pleasing directions for us.

But just wait, wait until next Sunday and the end of this episode. Wait until Jesus makes clear that these aren't simply pious sentiments and directions. They are orders. Which means that, as of that moment, the sufficient response to these words is no longer a polite nod and smile and "amen." Rather, the order is to conform our behavior to that of Jesus himself, our companion and guide, or to make a decision not to. We are either to *act* as good news and freedom—bringers and relief-offerers, and forgiveness extenders and mercy-operatives now, today, with Jesus to show us how. Or to refuse all that. But let us be clear: The option to do *nothing*, to merely *approve* of the directions without having any intent to live *into* them, is no longer an option. To do nothing is an act of rejection. Merely to favor of the *concept* of justice and compassion, while not *doing* any of that, is no longer an available choice for us. The guide is not only here to tell us how to get there but also to escort us there. We can accompany him, or not. And people of good faith hated that choice then and they hate it now. We'll hear again next week about how this same gathering of admirers ends up trying to throw their "hero" Jesus off a cliff because they didn't want to be made to *act* in response to the words.

We have all that we need to fulfill the responsibilities of Christian discipleship: We have the directions, the guide, the Savior to accompany us...and a decision to make.