Sunday, January 26, 2014  
“You Can’t Go Home Again”

Readings:  
Old Testament Reading: Ezra 8: 31-32; 9: 1-4  

We have two odd passages from Old and New Testament today. The first deals with Ezra the scribe, who led his people back from the Babylonian captivity, after the Persian King Cyrus (called “Messiah”) released the Jews after conquering Babylon in 537 B.C. after a captivity which had lasted anywhere from 60 to 70 years (scholars disagree). Many Jews, accustomed to the luxuries of Babylon, had no desire to move back to Israel, and in fact one of the two great restatements of Jewish law, the Babylonian Talmud was written by those who remained behind.

Ezra, if he was alive at all during the exile, must have been a very young man. If so, all he knew of Israel and Judah were the poems sung in exile. It would have been quite a surprise to find what he found when he led his righteous remnant back to Jerusalem. In today’s reading we read about how appalled Ezra was at all of the mixed marriages he found. Even the priests had taken on wives of Canaanite, Perizite, Hittite, Jebusite, Moabite, Egyptian and Moabite ancestry. No matter that King David’s great grandmother had been a Moabite, or that many of the Jews of marriageable age had been taken into captivity.

In any event, Ezra and his associate, Nehemiah, tore apart families of mixed descent, sending many into exile from Israel. They believed they were doing God’s will. But during the relatively brief period of the Babylonian captivity, the land once dominated by Jews had changed—forever. People had intermarried and formed break-away faiths from Jerusalem. The Samaritans worshipped (and worship to this day) at Mount Gerazim, rather than Jerusalem. Jewish leaders like Ezra could not abide these heretics living in the holy land—and even today Jewish religious zealots have similar feelings about the Arabic population who still live in Israel. Even today, the prohibition against intermarriage is enforced in the orthodox and ultra-orthodox Jewish communities.

Ezra tried to restore the old Israel which had never existed except in poetry and song. And he envisioned that only “ethnic cleansing” could do the trick, and generations later “ethnic cleansing” has been applied to Jews as well as many other ethnic groups to “purify” a nation.

Jesus also had a homecoming of sorts, as he left the temptations of the devil behind and began his Galilean ministry. After the incident read today, he quickly moved his center of operations to Capernaum. He didn’t get the hero’s reception that he expected when he returned to Nazareth. Matthew and Mark record that he was quickly identified as the son of nobodies, unimportant people in a one-horse town. No prophet is accepted in his hometown. But Jesus was more than merely rejected—as he told stories portraying gentiles in a good light, the people of Nazareth went all Ezra on him, leading him up to the brow on the hill where the town was built, intending to throw him off the cliff. Only Luke tells the story this way, possibly because Matthew and Mark knew that Nazareth was not built on a cliff. But Jesus passed through the midst of them and went to Capernaum and stayed with Peter.
You can't go home again. You change, and home changes. Familiarity breeds contempt—Jesus was a local boy, so what could he know? How could he be an expert on anything. A lawyer I once worked for me told me that an “expert” was anyone who had traveled at least thirty miles to give a speech or seminar. Distance lends enchantment—and we miss the prophets in our midst.

Jesus was now subject to the kindness of strangers. Foxes have their dens, and birds of the sky have their nests, but the son of man has nowhere to rest his head, Jesus lamented.

We have all seen Jesus on our street corners in Anchorage. People we used to call “alcoholics” and “hobos” we now call “homeless people,” but we still treat them with the same contempt. We really believe that if we can change what we call people we will change social attitudes about them. But we don’t trust them, don’t know how to help them, are a little frightened of them, and prefer to pass by on the other side of the street.

In the beginning of the soon-to-be famous play, “Jesus Christ’s”: Jesus walks up to a homeless man and introduces himself, and saying he has come to die for his sins. “Then what am I to die for?” the old man questions, and Jesus asks for a name and address so he can send him the answer. But his name is unimportant, and the refrigerator box he is sleeping in is his address. And his name is not important—at one point he identifies as Jesus, then as John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt. But the man who can't go home because he is homeless is in a drastically different situation than those of us who can’t go home, because home doesn’t feel like home any more.

Not everyone agrees with Thomas Wolfe’s sentiment that you can’t go home again. Perth Amboy, New Jersey native John Francis Bongiovi, Jr. (born March 2, 1962), known as Jon Bon Jovi, found that for all of his desire to escape New Jersey, New Jersey was home to him. He wrote a song, part of the lyrics follow:

I spent twenty years tryin' to get out of this place
I was lookin' for somethin' I couldn't replace
I was runnin' away from the only thing I've ever known
And like a blind dog without a bone
I was a gypsy lost in the twilight zone
I hijacked a rainbow and crashed into a pot of gold
I've been there, done that, now I ain't lookin' back
And the seeds I've sown, savin' dimes
Spendin' too much time on the telephone
Who says you can't go home?
Who says you can't go home?
There's only one place that call me one of their own
Just a hometown boy, born a rollin' stone
Who says you can't go home?

Bon Jovi expresses a different feeling about home: you can take a boy out of Jersey, but you can’t take Jersey out of the boy. Bon Jovi finds that home, the place where he feels welcome, is the same place he waited twenty years to escape.

William Martin Joel was born on May 9, 1949 in the Bronx. For Joel, “home” is not a fixed location as it is for Bon Jovi, even though he sings “A New York State of
"Mind" with love and passion. I quote from another of Billy Joel’s songs: “You’re my home”:

When you look into my eyes
And you see the crazy gypsy in my soul
It always comes as a surprise
When I feel my withered roots begin to grow
Well, I never had a place that I could call my very own
That's all right, my love, 'cause you're my home
When you touch my weary head
And you tell me everything will be all right
You say, "Use my body for your bed"
And my love will keep you warm throughout the night"
Well, I'll never be a stranger and I'll never be alone
Whenever we're together, that's my home
Home can be the Pennsylvania Turnpike
Indiana's early morning dew
High up in the hills of California
Home is just another word for you.

There are many clichés about home, such as “home is where the heart is.” But let me indulge you with 3 quick stories about what home means to me, as you think of what home is to you. Michele and I own a house in Waretown—a tenancy by the entirety, for the lawyers and paralegals among you. We have had tenants there longer than we actually lived there. It is no longer our home, it is a house we own.

When my parent’s house was sold out of the family, I lost a profound sense of home, in which I literally could not go home again. Robert Frost described home as “… the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” Although the family homestead still haunts my dreams, I know it is no longer the place where my parents lived for 58 years, raised 4 children, built a new bedroom every time a child was born. It was no longer my father’s craftsmanship on the field stone fireplace and chimney, nor the place where mom and dad dug out a basement with pickax and shovel. It used to be that place. I had a dream recently in which I was talking to my dad, who was sitting in his favorite chair. As in many such dreams, I am trying to convince him (and myself, of course) that he is really dead, that he should leave that home because he will go to a better place. And he smiles at me, looks around and says, “what could be better than this.” Like my mother, he lived in that home until he died, just ten months after she had.

And then a final quick home-thought. Stuck in San Francisco Airport for three days, and all we wanted to do was get home. To Anchorage, Alaska. To Daniel’s school. To this church family which took us in. Thank you for sharing your home with us.

Amen.