

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time - B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Isaiah 35:4-7a

Isaiah, his name means “Yahweh is salvation,” is one of the most outstanding and most important of the prophets. He was born around 760 B.C. and lived in Jerusalem. There is a good basis for thinking that he belonged to a distinguished priestly and perhaps noble family, judging from his education and culture and from his contacts with the court and nobility of the kingdom of Judah. He was married, with 2 children. In the year 742 B.C., on the death of King Uzziah, he received his calling as a prophet in a vision in the Temple of Jerusalem (Isaiah 6:1-8). From the moment Isaiah received his vocation he knew no rest. He was charged with proclaiming the downfall of Israel and of Judah in punishment for the unfaithfulness of the people and their failure to repent. Hebrew legend has it that Isaiah was put inside a hollow log and sawn in half during the reign of King Manasseh.

The book of Isaiah divides into 3 parts:

- 1) The book of the judgments of God (chapters 1-39),
- 2) The book of the consolation of Israel (chapters 40-55), and
- 3) Prophecies which extend the book of consolation (chapters 56-66).

Today's reading comes from chapter 35 which is part of the book of the judgments of God and speaks of the joy of restoration after God has passed judgment upon Edom (chapter 34).

⁴ Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, he comes with vindication; With divine recompense he comes to save you. ⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the

deaf be cleared;

The most unfortunate among the exiled will be among the first to share the blessings (see Matthew 11:4-5 for a sign that the Messianic age has arrived).

⁶ Then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the dumb will sing. Streams will burst forth in the desert, and rivers in the steppe. ^{7a} The burning sands will become pools, and the thirsty ground, springs of water.

2nd Reading - James 2:1-5

James (Jacob in Hebrew, it means “let God protect”) wrote this letter around A.D. 60. In it he shows himself to be steeped in the Old Testament and in the teachings of Jesus deriving from the Sermon on the Mount. He is writing to the “twelve tribes of the dispersion” (James 1:1). He seeks to encourage them to bear persecution bravely and to practice the Christian virtues, especially patience in the face of trial, and control of the tongue.

Saint James also gives great importance to care for the poor and humble, advising Christians not to give preference to people who are well-to-do or have a high social position – the reason being that Jesus was no respecter of status, and Christians should imitate Him. Our Lord loves both poor and rich, educated and uneducated – He gave His life for everyone. The subject of today’s reading is that we should not grade people according to external appearance, for a person’s quality is something that derives from his union with God – the more humble and understanding he is, the more honor he deserves.

^{2:1} My brothers [and sisters],

“My brothers” is Christian form of address, found widely also in Jewish usage, is used 15 times in James (sometimes without the “my”), usually in the context of an urgent appeal.

show no partiality

There is no partiality in God (Romans 2:11; Colossians 3:25; Ephesians 6:9).

as you adhere to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

Literally "our Lord of glory." The great glory of the Lord in whom we believe should nullify all such impressions of worldly rank or status as would lead to partiality in conduct.

² For if

This is not an actual incident, although very vividly described. This is a hypothetical situation

a man with gold rings on his fingers and in fine clothes comes into your assembly,

Actually, into the synagogue, the place of assembly. This indicates the Judeo-Christian background of the writer.

and a poor person in shabby clothes also comes in,

The rich man and the poor person are pictured as strangers to the community so that their social status is known only by their appearances.

³ and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Sit here, please,"

Is offered a seat of honor (Matthew 23:6; Mark 12:39; Luke 11:43; 20:46).

while you say to the poor one, "Stand there," or "Sit at my feet," ⁴ have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil designs? ⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers. Did not God choose those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith

The Old Testament belief is that the poor are the object of God's special care (Psalm 35:10) and of messianic blessings (Isaiah 61:1). 1 Corinthians 1:17-29

gives Paul's explanation of this divine choice – by reason of their faith they are rich.

and heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him?

This is a covenant promise. See also the first Beatitude (Matthew 5:3; Luke 6:20). Inheritance of the kingdom of heaven is the blessing which results from keeping the covenant.

Gospel - Mark 7:31-37

Today we continue our journey through the Gospel of Mark. Last week we heard the controversy about ritual purity, this week we skip over the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter and hear of Jesus' healing of a man who is both deaf and mute. In this miracle we can see a model of the way God acts on souls – for us to believe, God must first open our heart so we can listen to His word.

³¹ Again he left the district of Tyre and went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, into the district of the Decapolis.

This geographical route serves to link this episode with the previous one and provide a Gentile setting for the feeding of the four thousand, which follows immediately after this reading.

³² And people brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment

The word used here, *mogilalds*, occurs only here and in Isaiah 35:6 where it translates the Hebrew word for “dumb” (unable to speak).

and begged him to lay his hand on him.

The imposition of hands on the sick was a common feature in ancient healing rituals. It is based on the idea that the healer is a powerful person and is able to transmit healing. Healing through the imposition of hands is not mentioned in the Old Testament or in rabbinical writings but is mentioned in one of the

Dead Sea scrolls. Imposition of hands is a common New Testament form of healing and exorcism (Mark 5:5; 8:23-25; 16:18; Luke 4:40-41; 13:13; Acts 9:12; 9:17-18; 28:8).

³³ He took him off by himself away from the crowd.

The privacy of the cure echoes 1 Kings 17:19 where Elijah raises a boy from the dead and 2 Kings 4:33 where Elisha raises a boy from the dead. This privacy is also in keeping with the secrecy He sought in Mark 7:24.

He put his finger into the man's ears and, spitting, touched his tongue;

These gestures by Jesus are sacramental in that they achieve what they symbolize, the opening of the ears and the loosening of the tongue. It may be that such details were remembered in the Gospel as a guide to Christian healers in the early Church.

³⁴ then he looked up to heaven and groaned,

Jesus prayed to God and was moved with compassion for the man.

and said to him, "Ephphatha!" (that is, "Be opened!")

This utterance is usually understood to be the Aramaic word *eppattah*. The Greek *dianoigo*, in the parenthetical translation, is relatively rare in the New Testament, but it occurs 33 times in the Septuagint, significantly in Ezekiel 24:27.

³⁵ And (immediately) the man's ears were opened, his speech impediment was removed, and he spoke plainly.

The completeness of the cure is emphasized. "Ears opened" may be an allusion to Isaiah 48:8. "Speak plainly" see Wisdom 10:21.

"So open your ears and enjoy the good odor of eternal life which has been breathed upon you by the grace of the sacraments. This we pointed out to you as we celebrated the mystery of the opening and said: "*ephphatha*," that is, "be

opened,” so that everyone about to come to the table of grace might know what he was asked and remember the way he once responded. Christ celebrated this mystery in the Gospel, as we read, when He healed the one who was deaf and dumb” [Saint Ambrose of Milan (A.D. 390), *The Mysteries*, 1,3-4].

³⁶ He ordered them not to tell anyone.

Jesus’ prohibition of talking about the cure is probably part of Mark’s insistence that Jesus is more than a healer and that His full identity only becomes known in the cross and resurrection. The prohibition has the opposite effect. The reaction of the crowd gives witness to the reality of the cure, while underlining Jesus’ identity.

But the more he ordered them not to, the more they proclaimed it.

The verb “proclaimed” is ordinarily reserved by Saint Mark for the preaching of Jesus and of the disciples; here it is used for the crowd. It is a characteristically Christian term, strongly connected with the proclamation of the Gospel (John 1:14; 13:10; 14:9), and although the object of the man’s proclamation is not specified, the implication both of the command to silence and of the following verse is that he proclaimed the good news of Jesus as the Messiah.

³⁷ They were exceedingly astonished

Nowhere else does Mark emphasize so strongly the reaction of the crowd – an indication of its unusual significance.

and they said, "He has done all things well.

Many commentators see here an allusion to Genesis 1:31, implying that Jesus has brought about a new creation.

He makes the deaf hear and (the) mute speak."

See Isaiah 35:5-6 (part of our first reading) which is part of a vision of Israel’s glorious future. This brings out the theological lesson of the cure: the age of

Messianic salvation, announced by Isaiah, has arrived with Jesus.

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