

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME-B

September 9, 2018

First Reading – Isaiah 35:4-7a

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 146

Second Reading – James 2:1-5

Gospel – Mark 7:31-37

My dear brothers and sisters:

Today, the twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, the Church offers us insights into the loving heart of God. He suffers when we suffer. He wants us to be healed of our maladies: whether physical or spiritual. And since He is Father of us all, we should never exclude anybody from getting close to HIM, because the rest of humankind are our brothers and sisters. We belong to the same flock for whom He sent Jesus, His Son, the Lamb who was slain for us all.

Allow me to point out the several ills and sufferings that Isaiah mentioned in our First Reading:

1. those with “fearful heart” (verse 4),
2. those with obscured vision (verse 5),
3. those who had hindered hearing (verse 5),
4. those who had broken bodies (verse 6),
5. those who had silent tongues (verse 6).

It is not difficult to imagine that the literary “*body*” constructed by Isaiah represented Israel. Israel has been utterly overwhelmed by despair and weariness. The capacity/ability of the people needed to move through this world has been diminished.

But the God of Jacob did not abandon His people to their despair. Their sorrow would come to an end. The day will come when the sick body would find new life in God. If we continue reading, we will encounter this in verse

10: *“those who were ransomed by the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away (Isaiah 35: 10).*

Please know that while Isaiah, in our first reading, emphasized the use of corporeal language, chapter 35 actually began with the non-human creation (verses 1-2). Salvation was imagined in creational terms. The general theme was that desolate, dry places would be transformed into paradise.

People of God: Please understand that those who live in desert environs can appreciate the transformative power of water on the desert. Overnight, even a small amount of rain can change a dry desert into a vibrant landscape. Isaiah moved far beyond the natural consequences of water on the desert. Creation itself would "be glad," "rejoice," and sing (verses 1-2). Creation's praise joined human praise, in recognition of God's marvelous work.

Then, in verses 3 and 4, Isaiah exhorted the people, and gave them both a task and a sermon: *“Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God: He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you (verses 3-4).*

Isaiah confronted their fear with a promise: *“Here is your God ... He will come with vengeance ... He will come and save you.” (verse 4)*

Let us see the first reading with the eyes of Isaiah: Salvation opens up the world in new and miraculous ways (verse 5). Formerly hostile environments are transformed into places that are not only habitable, but are also *favorable for life*. The "old" and "new" creation are contrasted in terms of hydration and desiccation: water in the wilderness, streams in the desert, pools from burning sand, etc. (verses 6-7). **THERE IS CHANGE FOR THE BETTER BECAUSE GOD IS A LOVING GOD.**

Our Responsorial Psalm, which goes this way *“Praise the Lord, my soul”* is very appropriate for today's first reading. In different expressions, but maintaining the same theme of God's goodness, the psalm spells out the goodness of Yahweh.

In our Second Reading, James described to us a religious assembly; (1)perhaps worship in the homes among early Christians; or

(2) perhaps worship in the temple attended by all kinds of people coming from all walks of life. There may have been converts from Judaism to Christianity and converts from paganism to Christianity. He painted a picture, and then he told us what was wrong with that picture. In doing this, James exposed the sin of partiality or favoritism (criticism or rejection of someone based on any character-neutral trait).

James said : DO NOT DO THIS. We are forbidden to hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ ... *with partiality*. These things do not go together: claiming faith in Christ, yet being partial. There is no sense in being together in a religious assembly, like during Mass if we make distinctions and show favoritism.

Partiality is "respect of persons". We may use the word "favoritism" or "prejudice." When we discriminate against people merely on the basis of some no-character trait, we are doing something (thinking or acting) that isn't compatible with faith in Christ.

In this picture that James painted, we were told nothing about the character of these men, nothing about their spiritual status or behavior. Were they former Judaists or former pagans? We are not told. There was simply the presence of these two men who came into the assembly: one appeared to be rich, the other appeared to be poor.

The rich man was given gracious hospitality, a warm welcome, a good place to sit. The poor man was told, "*sit over here, out of the way!*"

James' comment on this picture was: "*Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*" (James 2:4)

After this indictment, James now is telling us that favoritism:

1. **is inconsistent with faith in Christ** (verse 1). If we consider what Jesus did, what Jesus taught and how Jesus behaved - there is no justification for favoritism. It is not compatible with faith in Christ.
2. **makes us "judges with evil thoughts,"** (verse 4). The kind of favoritism James described here does not come from good thoughts, but evil. The treatment we give to people depends upon our thoughts about them. This kind of insulting, dishonoring treatment stems from wrong or evil thoughts.

- 3. induces us to make distinctions** (verse 5). God is not a respecter of persons (Acts 10:34; Ephesians 5:1; 1 Peter 1:17). When we engage in the kind of behavior James described, we are not acting as God's children.

Anytime we focus on some non-character trait, and base our attitude and treatment of someone of that neutral thing - we are guilty of the kind of discrimination James says is not compatible with faith. Favoritism contradicts Faith. In that sense, favoritism is a clear contradiction of faith.

Now, let us go to the Gospel. The evangelist narrated the rare manner of healing of a man who was deaf-mute.

It would be easy for us to imagine how difficult it must have been for that deaf-mute person to communicate. We could imagine how isolated he was from people. For him to be noticed by others and for them, to plead to Jesus to touch him was a great favor .

Jesus took the man aside from the crowd, placed His fingers on both ears, then He spat and touched his tongue. Why did Jesus take the man away from the crowd?

Jesus wanted this man to stand out of the crowd, made him to face HIM as a person worthy of the attention of God, and be a part of the crowd again as a talking/hearing witness from then on, while Jesus admonished the crowd not to tell anyone about it. The man would be the most credible witness.

But the most important reason was this: Jesus knew that the deaf-mute person would feel how Jesus felt when He groaned and said: Ephphata ! The simple gestures of Jesus made the man more at ease with Him. He put His finger in the ears of this man. Then He spit and touched the man's tongue. That was gross. Wasn't it? No, it was not. The warmth of Jesus' touch was loving and curative. Jesus touched his very tongue and his very ears. I would like to imagine that while Jesus was touching the weak and defective parts of his body, he felt the power of life flowing from those hands, those warm hands of Jesus.

Why did Jesus do such a strange action? I have no answer to that. But, I think this man knew why. What Jesus did must have echoed in the heart of this man more than the comfort of many words. He could not hear even if Jesus spoke any way. Because the place where Jesus touched him with His hands, was a very weak section of his body and it was a part that was very disgusting; the source of the "curse on his life. The Lord was not a spectator of his pain;

He shared in that pain. With unworded groans, Jesus shared the suffering that the man bore as His own, and while doing that, He prayed to God the Father on his behalf. Then, facing him, the Lord said, "Ephphata."

This man may have suffered so much on account of his deaf ears. He may have received so much unfair treatment and he may have shed countless tears of pain. His tongue could never say it even if he tried to shout the "unfairness". His tongue did not move with freedom and ease, even to tell of his suffering and physical pain. He must have wondered many times . . . *"if only I didn't have this weakness"*.

My dear people of God: Where does the root of our hurts and sorrows lie? The problems we all have are different. The people around us may not understand our problems and hurts at all. But, the Lord stretches out His fingers to that section of our lives and touches us. Our situation, which may seem so hopeless, so powerless to us, but yet, it becomes a meeting place with Jesus, the Healer: it becomes the **point of contact** where we are touched by The Christ, The Anointed One of God.

Again, let me ask: Where does the root of our hurts and sorrows lie? It may be in a physical sickness of ours, it may be a personal issue we have. But, if we honestly search into the deepest root of our very own suffering, I think we all would ultimately come to the issue of our sin, and nothing but **SIN**. Our point of contact with Jesus is thru confession.

In the Old Testament the word translated "to hear" also at the same time means "to obey." Therefore, the disobedient Israelites refusing to listen are described as "*a people, though having ears, cannot hear,*" (Isaiah 43:8). In this way then, our sinfulness lies in the fact that we don't listen to God, we refuse to obey Him. We are happy to listen if it is convenient for us, but we stop our ears when it is inconvenient for us.

Christ has come in order to deliver us from sin. In order to atone for our sins, the Lord groaned in pain for us. He paid for the debt He never owed, because we could never pay the debt that we owed. And He groaned and sighed: "Consumatum est". It is finished, it is paid. Heaven is opened.

Brothers and sisters: What does the church offer us today? What good news can we bring home ?

We know for certain that God will never abandon us. We say that in the first reading. We also know that we must look at others as God sees them. God is never partial; so must we be. We belong to the same flock which Yahweh

cares for. And we know from the Gospel that we must constantly seek the healing presence of Christ, so that He can heal us, just the way He healed the deaf-mute. He can heal us if we approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Amen