

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME-B

September 16, 2018

First Reading – Isaiah 50: 4c-9a

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 116

Second Reading – James 2:14-18

Gospel – Mark 8:27-35

My dear people of God:

We would hear this reading every Lent, when the Church offers us points for meditation on the Suffering Servant of Yahweh. Chapters 42 until 53 of the book of Isaiah contain four (4) Servant Songs. The Servant is God's agent to do God's work in the world.

The first song (42:1-4) tells of the call of the Servant to *“bring justice to the nations”* (42:1).

The second song (49:1-6), further defines the Servant's mission. The Servant is *“to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel”* (49:6a). Furthermore, God says, *“I will also give you for a light to the nations, that you may be my salvation to the end of the earth”* (49:6b).

The third song (50:4-9) doesn't use the word, “servant,” but nevertheless describes the work and tenacious faith of the Servant. God has given the Servant a *tongue to teach and encourage the people* (50:4). God has given the servant an *ear to hear God and to hear the people* (50:5). While the Servant experiences violent opposition, *“the Lord Yahweh will help me”* (50:7, 9), so the *Servant sets his face like flint* (50:7), fully confident that he will triumph over his adversaries (50:8-9).

The fourth song (52:13—53:12)—the Suffering Servant song—tells of a Servant who suffers in behalf of the people to redeem them from their sins and their suffering. This Servant *“was pierced for our transgressions”* and *“by his wounds we are healed”* (53:5). *“He was oppressed, yet when he was afflicted he didn't*

open his mouth. As a lamb that is led to the slaughter..., he didn't open his mouth" (53:7).

Brothers and Sisters: Please know that we are reading now the third song. It would be beneficial for us to analyze the traits/character/descriptions contained here. I would want you to reach the conclusion that Isaiah has the Messiah in mind.

Isaiah describes the suffering servant: (1) as one whose ears have been opened by the Lord Yahweh; (2) as one who was *not rebellious, and never turned away backward*; (3) as one who *gave his back to the strikers, and his cheeks to those who plucked off the hair*; (4) as one who *didn't hide his face from shame and spitting*.

The phrase, "The Lord Yahweh was used three (3) times in these verses (verses 5, 7, 9). In each instance, the Lord God enables and empowers the Servant.

"The Lord Yahweh has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away backward"(verse 5).

"I gave my back to the strikers" (verse 6a). This sounds like scourging - a terrible beating with whips or rods.

"and my cheeks to those who plucked off the hair" (verse 6b). This is another form of physical punishment - one intended to inflict physical pain, disfigurement, and humiliation. In that culture, the beard was an important part of a man's identity. For someone to shave a man or to pluck his beard was to humiliate and to show great contempt.

"I didn't hide my face from shame and spitting" (verse 6c). While insults and being spat upon might seem mild compared with scourging and having one's beard plucked out, this sort of humiliation is nevertheless terrible.

"For the Lord Yahweh will help me; therefore I have not been confounded: therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be disappointed" (verse 7). The Lord called the Servant to say things that offended people, though rightly so; but the Servant could be tempted to blame the Lord for his predicament. However, rather than blaming God, the Servant speaks of God's help. Knowing that God leads him aright, the Servant feels neither disgrace nor shame. He sets his face like flint – and he shows steely determination. He has

rock-solid confidence that God will vindicate him in the long run, so he is able to endure suffering in the short run.

“He is near who justifies me; who will bring charges against me? Let us stand up together: who is my adversary? Let him come near to me” (verse 8). The Servant challenges all comers to a courtroom battle. He has the Lord as his defense counsel, so he needs to fear no prosecutor. He boldly dares his opponents to stand with him before the bar - to confront him in a legal proceeding where he will have a chance to defend himself. It becomes clear here that his earlier failure to resist violence (verse 6) reflected principle rather than lack of spirit.

“Behold, the Lord Yahweh will help me; who is he who shall condemn me?” (verse 9a). Let us recall that the Apostle Paul will put it this way: *“If God is for us, who can be against us?”* (Romans 8:31; and 33-34). Paul’s question doesn’t ask the identity of the opponent, but instead asks, “Who cares who the opponent is? What difference can it make?” That is what the Servant is saying when he says, “Who will declare me guilty?” Who, indeed! The Servant’s accusers will find themselves fighting God.

The Responsorial Psalm which goes this way, *“ I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living”* should be our response after knowing that Jesus is the Suffering Servant. Now, let us go to the Second Reading.

You may recall that last week, the Apostle James taught us to avoid favoritism, because it is totally incompatible with the Christian faith. Today, we will reflect on James’ declaration about faith and good works.

A few months ago, I told you about a Protestant pastor who gave his son 50 cents and told him he could use it any way he wanted. Later when Dad asked about it, the boy told him that he had lent it to someone. "Who did you lend it to?" the pastor asked. The boy answered, "I gave it to a poor man on the street because he looked hungry." Oh, that was foolish. You’ll never get it back," replied the father. "But Daddy, the Bible says that people who give to the poor lend to the Lord." The father was so pleased with the son’s reply that he gave the boy another 50 cents. "See," said the son. "I told you I would get it back—only I didn’t think it would be so soon!

People of God: Obviously, the pastor’s son possessed a living faith. Please know that James addressed his letter to the twelve tribes who were dispersed abroad. In fact, in chapter 1, verse 1, James gave them his greetings (James

1:1). They were Jewish converts from Judaism. These twelve tribes were the Diaspora Jews or the Jews of the “Dispersion”. They were those who left Jerusalem and were scattered around the Roman empire. These Jews were experiencing trials as indicated by his opening exhortation: *“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”* (James 1:2-4)

Earlier James challenged them to *“prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.”* (James 1:22). James' objective is to answer the question "What is genuine, saving faith?". James is teaching us that a living faith will authenticate itself in the production of works. Good works are the fruits; natural consequence of a living faith.

Now, let us go to the Gospel.

The evangelist Mark narrated to us that Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea Philippi. It would be beneficial for us to take a look at the geography of our episode. Please know that Jesus has most recently been at Bethsaida (Mark 8:22-26), a town on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. Now He traveled to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, about 25 miles (40 km) further north, at the foot of Mount Hermon. This was far to the north, and symbolized a major turning point in his ministry. He has been working in Galilee, a relatively friendly place, healing and teaching. Now He was on His journey southward toward Jerusalem, the center of the opposition to Him and the place where He will die.

People of God: I wish to invite your attention to the phrase, *“the way”* in verse 27. It is important to this Gospel. John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord (Mark 1:2), and Mark used the word again in chapter 9, verse 33; in chapter 10, verse 17, verse 32, and verse 52 to remind us that Jesus and His disciples were on their way to Jerusalem, where Jesus would be crucified. Caesarea Philippi seemed like an odd place for Jesus to begin such a significant journey. Its roots are more Greek than Jewish. Earlier named Paneas after the Greek God “Pan”, the city was then named Caesarea to honor Caesar Augustus. They built a temple to Caesar not far from the temple to Pan. Then they changed the name to Caesarea Philippi to honor the local ruler, Philip the tetrarch, son of Herod the Great—and to distinguish this city from another Caesarea (Maritima) located on the Mediterranean shore. Please understand that Mark wants us to get the idea of “the way” here as the

way of imitating Jesus even to the point of suffering and death. This we will see after Peter gets a rebuke from the Lord after blocking the Lord's way of saving us through suffering and death.

In verse 28, people speculated regarding His identity and came up with these same three possibilities: John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. Earlier in chapter 6, verses 14 and 15, these three personalities were already mentioned and in the same order: John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets (Mark 6:14-15). The people thought of Jesus, not *as the Messiah*, but as a great man like one of the great men of their history. They had their own ideas about the Messiah, and Jesus did not fit into the mold. Their idea of THE Messiah as David's successor, was one who would drive out the Romans, re-establish Israel's glory, and usher in a golden age. To accomplish these goals, they expected their Messiah to use traditional power: military or economic dominance. They expected their Messiah to be a super-man: a man like other men except for his greater power. But alas, brothers and sisters, Jesus re-defined power to mean drawing people to Himself through love. His love will be expressed in self-denial and cross-bearing.

It would be interesting to note that Mark began his gospel this way: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1).

Brothers and sisters: we can see that Mark wanted to portray Jesus as *the anointed* and as *the Son of God*. So, when Jesus asked in verse 29: "*But who do you say that I am?*" Peter gave Him the right answer. YOU ARE THE CHRIST, that is, the MESSIAH in Hebrew, the ANOINTED in English.

The words, "he began to teach them" (verse 31a) signal a change. Until now, this Gospel has been establishing Jesus' power and authority. Now Jesus turns his disciples away from Galilee, where He has experienced great success, and faces them towards Jerusalem, where He will die. As He changed to this new phase of His ministry, He had to teach the disciples what to expect: "*that the Son of man must suffer many things*" (verse 31b). Jesus referred to Himself as Son of Man rather than Christ or Messiah, which was how Peter identified Him in verse 29. The title, Son of Man, is likely to stir less opposition than the title, *Christos*. The Jewish people expected the *Christos* or the Messiah to be a great king and military leader like David, but had no such expectations of the Son of Man. While the Jews expected *a triumphant* Messiah, Isaiah spoke of a Suffering Servant in chapters 52 and 53: *a suffering servant who "shall be exalted and lifted up"* (Isaiah 52:13); *who was despised and rejected by men; a*

man of suffering, and acquainted with disease” (Isaiah 53:3); who “was pierced for our transgressions... and crushed for our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:5).

In verse 31b, Mark uses the word must: “the Son of Man must”(verse 31b). This little word **MUST** appears frequently in the Gospels, and in precisely this manner. Biblical Scholars speak of it as the Divine Imperative, because it is God’s will that Jesus must suffer, die, and rise again.

It is interesting to note the parallel between “*Jesus began to teach*” (in verse 31) and “*Peter began to rebuke Him*” (in verse 32). Let us recall that “*When Jesus first met Peter, he said, Come after me*” (Mark 1:17). Peter has been coming after Jesus ever since, however imperfectly. And now Jesus told him: “*Get behind me, Satan!*” (verse 33a). Jesus refers to Peter as Satan – which means an obstacle, or a hindrance.

“He called the multitude to himself with his disciples” (verse 34a)

Jesus has been speaking to the disciples, but now He called the crowd to join the disciples for a lesson on discipleship: “*Whoever wants to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me*” (verse 34b). Discipleship involves self-denial and cross-bearing. Now, this, my brothers and sisters, is for us.

Jesus gave us a threefold standard for discipleship. We are to (1) deny ourselves (2) to take up our cross and (3) to follow Him. Jesus does not call us to deny our value. We are created in God’s image, so how could we not have value? Neither does He call us to deny ourselves pleasure—the ascetic can be the most ego-centered person of all. Jesus instead calls us to make God the center of our affections - to subordinate our will to God’s Will. Amen.
