

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

Today's readings remind us of the importance of compassion in our lives and our relationships. This aspect of human interaction plays a prominent part in the literature of both Testaments of the Bible simply because it is the ultimate expression of respect and graciousness. Modern readers might be surprised to see how intensively the biblical writers focused on liberation of the oppressed and healing for the physically sick and the psychologically damaged. From the Hebrew prophets to Jesus and his followers relief for the underdog was always a major priority.

Isaiah 35:4-7 It is easy to forget that all Scripture responds to real circumstances. Chapters 34 and 35 of Isaiah introduce the key theme of return from the captivity in Babylon, which lasted around 60 years between 597 and 539 BCE. Today's extract was written by the anonymous prophet, usually referred to as Second Isaiah. First Isaiah was a Jerusalem-based prophet who flourished in the mid-700s BCE.

In today's passage the prophet is encouraging his people to rejoice at the end of their captivity and to look forward to returning home to Jerusalem. He presents a positive picture of the restoration of the Jewish homeland. His rich poetry lays out a utopian land where the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will walk and the voiceless will be able to speak. In addition, the desert will flow with water and springs will moisten a thirsty land.

This is a picture of hope for a people who have learned their lesson and have been given the reassurance that faithfulness to God is the only way to go.

Psalms 145/146 Today's selection comes from a post-exilic psalm written after the second temple had replaced the destroyed temple of Solomon. It is clearly a litany of favours bestowed by God on the disadvantaged and oppressed. At the same time, it offers the singer and us a program of attitudes and behaviour that we might adopt to improve our lives. The poet is urging us to imitate the divine compassion and graciousness in all our dealings with others.

James 2:1-5 This extract from the letter of James gives us an insight into some social elements of early Christian life. Scholars debate whether James is referring to community gatherings for prayer and liturgy or to assemblies that were called to adjudicate on some issue. The earliest Jesus people were Jewish and continued to call their assembly a synagogue, which primarily describes a gathering. In time, the word applied to the building in which the community gathered. In any case, James is making it clear that Christian behaviour towards others should not be defined by distinctions of class, race or wealth.

Allusions to Jewish biblical texts (Deuteronomy 16:19-20) and rabbinic commentary (*Midrash Tanhuma*) are fairly obvious, not only in today's passage but throughout the whole of this letter. In fact, one statement from the Midrash reads: *God stands with the poor and not with those who oppress them.* It is obvious to us what James is getting at with his over-the-top examples of attitudes towards rich and poor. Only a corrupt judge, he implies, would use a standard of judgment that conflicts with the values of Jesus himself.

It should be clear that when James writes of being rich in faith he is not talking simply about a set of beliefs. He means the kind of Christian behaviour that flows from a faith commitment to the person and values of Jesus Christ. The pettiness of judging by externals and being partial to people of wealth or influence shows disregard for spiritual values and is not worthy of a follower of Christ.

Mark 7: 31-37 Mark describes Jesus coming from the district of Tyre, which was a port on the Mediterranean coast of southern Phoenicia, present day Lebanon. He headed southeast towards the Decapolis area, which was a league of ten ancient Greek cities (Greek. *dekapolis* = ten cities) situated on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River. These regions were not inhabited by Jewish people, so Jesus was mostly speaking to non-Jews. Maybe this was a break for him, getting away from 'his own who received him not' as John put it in his gospel prologue.

With a reputation for healing Jesus was approached by some individuals who brought along a deaf man. He was probably not deaf from birth since he had some ability to speak. Mark describes Jesus going through a process of healing by putting his fingers into the man's ears and placing a drop of his

own spittle on the man's tongue. In the ancient Greco-Roman world spittle was regarded as having healing properties. Even today we recognise that saliva on skin dryness or a wound sets up a small humid environment that can ease inflammation.

Jesus then looked symbolically to heaven, groaned and commanded the healing to take place. Notice that unlike other healers he did not use an incantation, gibberish or secret formulas to bring about a result. He uttered normal speech and a wonder took place. Mark regards this as an amazing miracle and his allusion to Isaiah 35:5 makes it clear that he is convinced Jesus is performing an act that only God can accomplish.

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened
And the ears of the deaf unstopped.

Mark notes that Jesus urged the onlookers (not the man with his hearing and speech restored) to keep quiet about this cure. This command to secrecy is a feature in Mark and perhaps his intention was to highlight the impossibility of keeping the activity of Jesus quiet. People are naturally going to express their astonishment to all and sundry. It makes a fabulous story.

We are all called to be healers

It is only in hindsight that the disciples of the risen Lord can appreciate the full significance of the words and actions of the itinerant Jesus.

I firmly believe we are all called to be healers, to be the agents lifting others up. One of the words for 'forgive' in the Hebrew Bible is *nasah* which has the basic meaning of lifting – lifting a burden, whether physical or psychological. Surely forgiveness involves lifting the burden. Jesus himself has a problem with the religious leaders who put burdens on people with their human generated customs and obligations, but do nothing to lift the burdens (Matthew 23:4).

By showing compassion and learning to allow people to be who they are is graciousness in action. Walking in companionship with others is a form of self-giving. It works best when it is understated and devoid of expectations. There are no academy awards for subtle generosity and kindness.

Thoughtfulness, the kindly regard for others, is the beginning of holiness.

Mother Teresa

Shortly after the Christmas break Jasmine came home from school with a bad report. Her mother asked her, 'What was the trouble?'

Jasmine answered, 'Oh there was no trouble. You know how things are always marked down after the holidays.'

Laurie Woods