

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

Of the motifs that surface in today's readings the gift of self in the service of others stands out as a keynote. This is the distinguishing mark of the authentic prophet who is driven on by an acute fire in the belly to speak out for 'the way of the Lord.'

Isaiah 50:5-9 This is the third of the so-called 'Servant Songs' in which the speaker is the servant and the audience is those Israelites that have wandered away from God. In the verses just before today's extract the prophet tells of God waking him up to the situation in which Israel finds itself and instructing him to go and 'wake up' Israel. This is a perfect example of the prophet not only speaking out the divine message but he is the divine message in his person. The metaphor is actually along the same lines as the message coming from James in the second of today's readings.

The prophet then declares that he has responded to YHWH's call and has suffered terribly for it. When Middle Eastern tormentors tear out a man's beard and spit in his face they are submitting him to a hostile form of shame. This metaphor could also apply to the Jerusalemite community that has undergone military defeat and the shame of exile in Babylon.

The prophet knows that God has not abandoned him and will vindicate him. By extension of the metaphor, Israel will be vindicated if they return to God and pursue the way of the Lord. With the Lord on his side the prophet is impervious to blows and insults and this enables him to set his face like steel and endure the onslaught. Powerful trust indeed!

Psalms 116 There are clues in this psalm that indicate it was composed in the period of the reconstruction of Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. It is possible that the people of the time saw God's restoration of Israel as a mark of divine protection. This may have given rise to a certain national hubris, in terms of, 'God is on our side and we are invincible.'

A takeaway for us is an appreciation of the power of compassion. The psalmist sings, 'The Lord is gracious and fair/just and shows compassion' and the Hebrew verb here, *m^erakhem*, means that God's normal way of acting is to radiate compassion. The poet adds, 'The Lord protects the simple' and the Hebrew word *pti* refers to the gullible, those who might be easily sucked into the lies of the devious and cunning, those who might not have the wherewithal to defend themselves against fraud and intellectual tricksters.

Confident in the character of the Lord the psalmist throws himself on divine compassion. The way to go is to walk in mindfulness of the presence of the Lord, for this is being in the land of the living.

James 2:14-18 This is James continuing his argument that faith without action or a habit of responding to others with compassion is self-deception. Genuine faith, he argues, reaches out to help others because it is founded on a true appreciation of the worth of every person. A 'faith' that is particular about whom it supports is really not honest. James is clear that fine words and compassionate sounding sentiments are fake if not backed up by deeds. We recognise that he is stating the obvious, but he is also alluding to the timeless human tendency to mentally turn our 'gunnas' into fake reality. 'I'm gonna be a compassionate person and reach out to others but I never actually get around to it.'

Every gift, every helping hand can be a form of self-giving.

In today's episode we see the eyes of the disciples being opened.

Mark 8:27-35 This reading is pivotal in the gospel of Mark. It occurs at a halfway point at which Mark raises the issue of who Jesus is. The believing listener/reader has known from the beginning of this gospel who Jesus is but the disciples are now coming to grips with his identity. This is played out in the exchange between Jesus and Peter. It is appropriate to recall the fact that the gospels were written to be read out and explained to mostly illiterate Christians gathered for worship. Just prior to this episode Mark describes Jesus restoring the sight of a blind man by putting saliva on his eyes and laying his hands on him. In today's episode we see the eyes of the disciples being opened.

The agenda is set up with the question, 'Who do people say I am?' and the disciples offer some opinions. Suggesting the answer of John the Baptist implies that John had been murdered by Herod Antipas and some thought Jesus was John back from the dead. Others speculated that he might have

been the prophet Elijah or one of the other prophets. But then the key question was put by Jesus to draw out a confession of faith and Peter replied, affirming Jesus as the hoped-for Messiah. Coming forward to the world of Mark, around 71AD, we can appreciate how the question applies to Mark's community, again, to elicit a declaration of faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

Mark then adds a reference or prophecy from Jesus that as the Christ he and his teaching would be rejected by the Jewish religious leaders who would have him arrested, tortured and put to death. This would then culminate in his rising from the dead a few days later. Scholars refer to Jesus' words as his first passion prediction. But Peter is shocked. He cannot possibly imagine a prophetic and charismatic person like Jesus being arrested and put to death. The irony here is that Jesus is speaking plainly and his disciples don't get it.

Jesus then says to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan!' which recalls a similar scene in a vision of the prophet Zechariah (3:2) where Satan is rebuked by the Lord. The Hebrew *satan* means the adversary whose job is to test humans and try their virtue. Peter is acting like the adversary trying to turn Jesus away from doing God's will. He is not thinking from God's point of view; he is thinking human thoughts.

The next section of this reading comes to us like an apostolic teaching put into the mouth of Jesus. It is about discipleship and points out that a commitment to follow Christ may well involve hardship, criticism, even persecution and death. Historically there was no indication at this point in Jesus' life that he was going to be killed by crucifixion. However, the metaphor applies that followers of Christ must be prepared to bear hardship and opposition, that is, carry their cross in imitation of their Lord.

Who can I encourage today?

This scene can remind us that suffering is part of being human. Can anybody go through life with enduring some kind of suffering? There is no answer to the question of 'why'; there is only our ability to make a response and deal with pain in the most positive way we can. One way is to be conscious of the suffering of others and that our response to that might be to reach out in friendship and compassion. We are all called to healers and our uplifting attitude to others can be a catalyst for healing. Who can I encourage today? This can be a giving of myself.

Sorrow makes us all children again, destroys all differences of intellect. The wisest know nothing

A boxer kept swiping the air furiously but could not hit his opponent.

'How am I doing?' he asked his trainer at the end of the round.

'Well, if you keep this up,' said the trainer, 'he might feel the draughts and catch a cold.'

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