



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

The Twenty-Third Sunday of Ordinary Time

September 9, 2018

St. Mary of the Assumption Parish

Today's Themes in Scripture

One recurring theme in Mark's Gospel is that Jesus' identity as Messiah is poorly understood. The crowds who witness his many miracles and hear his preaching struggle to decide if Jesus is a gifted teacher, a great prophet, the promised Messiah, or the carpenter's son. He is misunderstood by the Pharisees who find contradiction in Jesus' attitude toward the Law, something they would not expect to find in Israel's Messiah. He is misunderstood by his own disciples, who are slow to grasp who Jesus is despite the closeness of their relationship to him. Jesus confounds everyone's expectations of what a Messiah should be.

In today's Gospel, Mark tries to make the identity of Jesus clear to his readers by linking the story of the healing of a deaf-mute man with a passage from Isaiah. In the Gospel story, Jesus is passing through Gentile lands where a crowd approaches with a man who cannot hear or speak. They beg Jesus to heal him. Mark describes this man's affliction with a rare word that is only used one other time in the entire Bible: in the passage from Isaiah that is read today. Every Jew hearing Mark's Gospel would have understood that this passage of Isaiah described things they would expect to see when the Messiah appears. Healing of the blind, deaf, and lame would be signs that the Messiah has come.

Other details in the Gospel reveal more about Jesus as Messiah. In this story, the deaf-mute man is a Gentile. Jesus doesn't just heal him using words alone. The way in which Jesus healed this Gentile man, putting his fingers in his ears and touching his tongue with saliva, reflects healing practices of his time but it also violated Jewish purity laws. A Jew could not have that kind of contact with a Gentile and not be defiled. Mark's Gospel stresses that the heart of the Law is love for God and others, and that Jesus could not be defiled by bringing healing to this man.

The healings that Jesus performed fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah and revealed him as Messiah. At the same time, his healing of a Gentile underscored that the Messiah came to bring salvation, not only to the Jews, but to all.

The example of Jesus healing a deaf man from outside the Jewish community, and the words of St. James in today's second reading, direct Christians to avoid all partiality in their regard for, and treatment of others. In our divided world, where people are casually judged by differences in appearance, status, and beliefs, today's Scriptures challenge believers to follow the example of Jesus. For the Messiah, no one is unworthy of his love or attention.

Sunday Readings and Background

Reading I: Isaiah 35:4-7a

Be strong! Fear not!

- Today's reading from Isaiah looks forward to a coming age of glory, when all Israel's infirmities will be abolished.
- This will be the age of the messiah; God's anointed one, who comes to bring salvation to Israel.
- The power of evil will no longer manifest itself in sickness or afflictions of any kind.

Responsorial Psalm: Ps. 146: 6-7, 8-9, 9-10

Praise the Lord, my soul! Praise the Lord!

Reading II: James 2:1-5

Did not God choose the poor to become rich in faith?

- The reading from James draws our attention to affliction and oppression.
- If you shun people with physical impairments and those who are poor, you have missed Jesus' message.
- Faith in Jesus is expressed by working to free oppressed people.

Gospel: Mark 7:31-37

He makes the deaf hear!

- Today's Gospel story portrays Jesus' healing as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.
- The deaf man with the speech impairment who is brought to Jesus is a Gentile.
- The man is healed when Jesus touches the parts of him that are weak and impaired.

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Opening Our Ears

The Letter of James stands out in Christian literature for its relentless insistence on justice in action as the sign of Christian faith. The vignette James gives us today may be the Christian Scripture's first condemnation of "profiling." James was writing to a community that apparently separated the ins from the outs by their dress, a detail even less revealing about a person than their ancestry, height, weight or color of skin. (Think about that in light of the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve tried to create fashion from fig leaves, they were inventing clothes to hide rather than express who they really were!)

James told his community a story of two visitors to a religious gathering. One is all but dripping with gold, while the other, like Pig Pen of the "Peanuts" cartoon, radiates what we might call a very earthy aura and aroma. The group's reaction is just what would be expected — unless they purported to be Christians.

James reproaches his community for acting like the people in the story he made up. He accuses them of acting like bribable judges by making distinctions among the members of their congregation. James calls them on the carpet for betraying God's priorities. Even as James tells the community to make no distinctions, he points out that God has consistently chosen the poor to be rich in faith.

This Gospel teaching is especially challenging to economically comfortable communities of faith. Since 1968, the bishops of Latin America have been outspoken in their prophetic demands that the church recognize the unique role the poor play in Christianity. In 2007, the bishops published a document edited under the leadership of future Pope Francis that summarized their international meeting at Aparecida, Brazil. The bishops reminded the church that we meet Christ particularly in the poor and that the poor have a special claim on our commitment. They went on to say that the church's faithfulness to Christ is at stake in our recognition of Christ in the poor. They summarize the prophetic position of the poor by saying, "Our very adherence to Jesus Christ ... makes us friends of the poor and unites us to their fate." (Document of Aparecida #257).

With that in mind, let's imagine James' fictional community as they look over their two unexpected guests. What would they have said if one of their members jumped up, rushed past Goldfingers and the religious leaders to embrace the shabby guest cheerfully shouting, "Dusty! We have been waiting so long for you! You have so much to teach us! Come up to the ambo so you can get started." Can't you imagine a curmudgeon stage-whispering, "If she knew he was coming, why didn't she get him a bath before he showed up?"

James' insistence on the importance of the poor throws a unique light on the Gospel and the selection from Isaiah we hear today. Isaiah proclaims that God's activity among us gives sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf and leads the lame to dance. (Note: There's nothing about bathing or dressing well.) How likely is it that we who dress decently are the blind and deaf and lame to whom Isaiah refers?

We can appreciate today's Gospel story — the miracle of healing the deaf man — as a marvel of Jesus' power and leave it at that. On the other hand, we might ask where we fit in this story. Mark tells us that some unnamed people brought the deaf man to Jesus. Who in our society or world might be trying to lead us to a miracle of more acute hearing?

As we discern how to address societal needs, we can look to Pope Francis and church teaching through the ages. From the time that Jesus looked at his disciples and said, "Blessed are you poor" to the present time, Christianity has taught that the poor and those who work for justice represent the reign of God among us. The people moving the ecological efforts throughout the world are trying to open our ears to the cry of the earth. In our country, pro-life activists, the proponents of Black Lives Matter, the Me Too movement and the high school disarmament activists would say they are trying to bring our society to its senses. Perhaps, God is working through them somehow to move us to hear what our faith demands in today's world.