

23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time

Sept. 6, 2009

INTRODUCTION: The prophet Isaiah is speaking to God's people during their captivity in Babylon: "Be strong, fear not! Here is your God...he comes to save you." God's salvation is expressed in terms of healing the blind and the deaf, the lame and the mute. The desert would come alive with rivers and springs and an abundance of life-giving water. The reading prepares us for the gospel where Jesus heals a man who was a deaf mute. Jesus' healing work was a work of compassion, but it also announced in a dramatic way God's saving presence among his people. In our own times of trial, we need to remind ourselves over and over again of these words of Isaiah: "Here is your God...he comes to save you."

HOMILY: Two years ago in January the Washington Post conducted an experiment you may have heard about. The experiment involved Joshua Bell, one of the world's greatest violinists who performed for almost all the world's orchestras. Joshua Bell was commissioned to play his \$4,000,000 Stradivarius violin in a subway station in Washington, DC. So he dressed like a street musician looking for tips and sat in the subway station playing for 45 minutes. The Washington Post had a hidden camera to video the entire event. Out of the 1097 people who passed by him, seven stopped to listen! He received \$32.17 in tips not counting the \$20 he received from one person who recognized him.

The story would be an excellent illustration of what St. James tells us in today's second reading, but I prefer to use this story to illustrate today's gospel. I am presuming that those 1097 people who passed by Joshua Bell had good hearing, but their ability to know what to listen for wasn't very well developed - at least not in the area of music.

Jesus healed a man in today's gospel who was deaf. What a gift Jesus gave him! He could suddenly hear which is amazing. But he still had a lot of catching up to do to learn how to listen, how to recognize, for example, sounds that warn of imminent danger, how to recognize not only words but also nuances in the tone of a person's voice, how to recognize sounds from nature, how to learn what unfamiliar words mean.

We who are blessed with hearing are sometimes not good listeners. This happens in families a lot: spouses with each other, children with parents and vice versa. This happens with God too. He hears us, ("shall he who made the ear not hear?") but we do not always hear him. That's why we need to keep reading the Scriptures over and over, because when we do we discover there is more and more that they can teach us. That's why we need to take quiet time to pray, because there's so much noise around us and God usually speaks in a very quiet voice. As a matter of fact, I've always found that God speaks in thoughts rather than words. When our thoughts are always being pushed and pulled by all the noise around us (including visual noise) thoughts from God do not seem to get through.

The guidance I received that helped me in my relationship with God came from good spiritual

books, inspiring speakers and teachers, wise friends, a good confessor, renewal programs and retreats for which I must give credit. Notice in today's gospel, the deaf man's friends brought him to Jesus and begged Jesus to lay his hands on him. We need good books and friends and people in our lives who can lead us to Jesus by their faith and sometimes we have to be the person who leads others to Jesus, but at the same time there is no substitute for quiet time. Notice when Jesus healed the man he took him aside – away from the crowd. We need to get away from the crowd each day to spend a little while in silence with our Lord. Quiet time has been essential to me ever since I can remember, helping to keep me going through difficult times, giving me ideas when I had an issue I couldn't figure out, helping me with what I needed to say to a person needing help, allowing me to experience God's loving presence.

Jesus worked many miracles of healing and he still does. In the gospels we read he healed people because of his compassion, in response to a request, in response to faith, to demonstrate that God's kingdom was present. He healed people to show in a visible way the blessings he wanted to give to us that were not visible. Jesus helped this man to hear, and in doing so he shows us what his primary mission was, to teach us how to hear and how to listen to God. Let us ask God to open the ears of our hearts to his word and to his love as we continue offering Mass today. Amen.

24th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Sept. 13, 2009

INTRODUCTION – Isaiah 50, 5-9; James 2, 14-18; Mark 8, 27-35

The book of the prophet Isaiah contains four poems commonly referred to as Servant Songs. They are mysterious passages because no one is sure whom they referred to originally. They describe one whom God had chosen from before birth - not only to serve God and to serve God's people in Israel, but to be a light to all nations. It's amazing how perfectly these Servant Songs, written over 500 years before Christ, describe Jesus. Today's passage describes how God's Servant would encounter resistance, persecution and martyrdom, and how God would stand by him during all his trials. We hear this same passage again on Palm Sunday and on Wednesday of Holy Week. It was chosen for today because we hear Jesus predict in today's gospel that suffering, death and resurrection are ahead for him.

HOMILY: Caesarea Philippi is one of the places I visited in the Holy Land 20 years ago. I still remember it well. It is in northern Galilee near where the Jordan river begins. The area is not dry like most of Israel, but it is lush with much vegetation and water. There is a shrine there that was dedicated to the Greek god, Pan. The shrine is carved into a high cliff, along with a number of other niches, which held statues of Greek and Roman gods and goddesses. It was in this setting that Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" Then he asked, "Who do you say I am?" Here is the Son of God asking, "We see ourselves surrounded by all these gods and goddesses. Who do you say that I am?" Peter said, "You are the Christ, i.e., you are the

Messiah, the long awaited savior.” The word Messiah is from the Hebrew, which designated one who was anointed, that is: a king or a priest. The Greek word for Messiah is Christos. Jesus told them not to tell anyone about him; Jesus may have had several reasons why he didn't want them to tell others about him, but one reason is obvious from the gospels: Peter could recognize Jesus as Messiah, but he really had only a limited idea of what Messiah meant. Jesus instructed them that it meant Jesus would have to suffer if he were going to save the people – an idea Peter rejected and for which Jesus severely reprimanded him.

It is this problem of suffering that is precisely where a lot of people lose faith in God or lose faith in Christ. We see so much suffering around us and we ask, “Why doesn't God put a stop to all this suffering?” or “Why does Christ allow this or that tragedy to happen?” I was asking myself this question Friday while thinking of what happened on 9/11/2001. Like Peter we want to say: “This cannot be.”

Most of us have a favorite way of picturing Jesus: as Savior, or an understanding friend, or a merciful and forgiving person, a great teacher, a powerful healer, a good shepherd, as the Sacred Heart, an advocate for the poor, an eternal king, the Son of God, a great storyteller. But to think of him in his sufferings and as one who tells us if we want to follow him we might have to suffer too – that's not an image many people like to dwell on. I know from my own experience that when I am suffering, it is very comforting to think of how Jesus suffered. Other than Lent, I don't believe most people reflect much on Christ as our suffering savior. The gospels, especially today's gospel, tells us that's a big part of who Jesus is and that's how he saved us all.

It's so much a part of who he is it's the principal way he asked us to remember him. He gave us his body to eat - his body which he gave for us, and his blood to drink - his blood which he shed for us; and he said “do this in remembrance of me.” I wonder if this is perhaps the reason why people so easily excuse themselves from Mass, because, like Peter, they still have to learn about the mystery and the power of the cross. Like Peter most of us want a Messiah (a Christ) who will take away our problems - not one who has to suffer and who tells us to take up our cross if we wish to follow him.

Let me conclude with two points. First of all, I want to say something about suffering. Simply because we are human, we're going to face suffering of one kind or another. Do not think following Christ will make your crosses in life any heavier, on the contrary it will make them lighter and easier to bear. Peter hadn't come to that understanding yet in today's gospel, but eventually he did.

The final point is that when Jesus said “whoever wishes to save his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake will save it,” does not mean we all have to be martyrs if we want to get to heaven. What Jesus said about losing one's life was literally true in many cases in the early Church when there were persecutions, and it is literally true in some parts of the world today. We must be willing to hold on to our faith even in the face of death. But for people in 21st century in countries where there is religious freedom, we need to understand that losing our life

for Christ means basically losing the selfish, proud, negative, unholy side of ourselves so that we can be the kind of person who pleases God. In this we will be saved.

In the question “who do you say that I am?” it’s not enough just to be able to give the right answer. The gospels show us that coming to know Jesus is an on-going process throughout our lives. It’s a matter of getting to know him better and not trying to make him into who we want him to be. Amen.