

23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time – B Cycle Sept. 6, 2015

INTRODUCTION: In our first reading, we hear the prophet Isaiah speaking words of encouragement to God's people during their captivity in Babylon. He proclaims: "Be strong, fear not! Here is your God...he comes to save you." God's salvation is expressed in terms of numerous blessings among which are healing the blind and the deaf, the lame and the mute. 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 the saving presence of God among his people. In our own times of trial, we need to remind ourselves over and over that God is with us. In some way, even if we do not understand it, he is touching us with his saving love.

HOMILY: The basic belief of our faith is that Jesus saves; the very name "Jesus" means "God saves." If we do not know Jesus as a savior, we do not know Jesus at all. But what does he save us *from*? He saves us from many things. I can't say how many times I've felt Jesus' saving presence in avoiding a terrible accident while on the road. He saves us from sin and the effects of sin, perhaps from a strong temptation, a serious sickness, harm from someone who dislikes us. At the end of our lives, he brings those who love him into his kingdom of eternal life and assures us we will share in his risen life on the last day. These are just some of the ways he is our savior. Hopefully, you can see he is with us as our savior all through our lives and beyond into the next life. As he tells us in John's gospel, "I came that they may have life and may have it to the full." (*Jn 10,10*)

Yet this fullness of life unfolds gradually throughout our lives. When we reach the end of this present life, we will know in all its glory the fullness of life Christ came to bring us.

In today's gospel, we are shown how Jesus may touch us with his healing love if we ask him. I want to note especially two interesting features in today's gospel. First: we are told that the deaf man's family and friends "begged" Jesus to cure the man. What does that tell us about prayer? First of all, numerous people were involved here, asking for a favor from our Lord, and they didn't give up asking. They approached Jesus with a sense of urgency and expectation that Jesus would respond to their request. So, if we need Our Lord's help, we should enlist others to pray with us and most of all, we should not give up praying when we don't get what we want right away. Jesus even preached a couple of parables about praying without ceasing - that we are to keep on knocking when we need his help. People give up on God too fast. They are used to going into a store, buying what they want and leaving. When they don't get from God what they want instantaneously, they turn away and say "God just doesn't hear me."

The second thing interesting about this healing is that Jesus told the people not to tell anyone about it. There are various interpretations of what is called the Messianic secret, which is especially evident in Mark's gospel. One simple interpretation is that Jesus was not looking for fame or notoriety. He wasn't advertising in order to start a healing business. He wasn't trying to prove anything. He cared about people and wanted to help those who came to him for help. It's just what he did.

Not only did he heal people himself, he sent his disciples out to do the same thing. "They drove out many demons, and they anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them." (*Mark 6,13*) They were not always as successful as Jesus, but they did many good things.

We see in the *Acts of the Apostles* how Peter and Paul performed many miraculous deeds. Jesus promised his apostles: "Amen, Amen, I say to you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these, because I am going to the Father." (*Jn. 14,12*)

The great St. Augustine who lived in the 5th century said that in his time, healings no longer happened because they were no longer necessary to spread the faith. However, toward the end of his life, he took back what he had said and described miraculous cures he had seen and which caused him to change his mind. (*Francis MacNutt, Healing, pg. 58*) Healings still happen if we don't give up on God too soon. I've seen them happen and I have great confidence in the Sacrament of the Sick and am happy to administer it when asked to do so. I believe in calling on medical professionals when necessary, but I also believe that today's gospel is telling us Jesus is still at work in the world, saving and healing. Amen.

24th Sunday of Ordinary Time - B Cycle **Sept. 13, 2015**

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 before birth - not only to serve God and to serve God's people in Israel, but to be a light for all of humanity. 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 in today's gospel Jesus' first prediction that suffering, death and resurrection are ahead for him.

HOMILY: A married lady went out shopping one day and when she returned home she brought with her a beautiful dress. She showed it to her husband who almost had a stroke when he heard how much it cost. She agreed with him that it was very expensive, but she said she tried it on and she looked so beautiful in it she couldn't resist the temptation to buy it. Her husband told her you should have said: "get behind me, Satan." She said that's exactly what I said, and Satan said "you look fabulous from back here too!"

When Jesus told Peter: "get behind me, Satan," he wasn't calling Peter a devil. He was saying that Peter was doing Satan's job by trying to tempt Jesus away from following what Jesus knew was the Father's will for him - to suffer and to die for the redemption of the world. The Jewish people knew an anointed leader was coming who would save God's people. That anointed leader was called in Hebrew, Messiah and in Greek, the Christ. They expected, however, a powerful and glorious savior - not a suffering Messiah.

Peter answered rightly that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, but he didn't know about the suffering the Messiah would undergo. That's why Jesus didn't want the Apostles to tell anyone about him. They still had a lot to learn. Peter especially had to learn that Jesus was the Master and Teacher. Peter forgot he was Jesus' follower when he called Jesus aside and started to instruct Jesus that he would not have to go through any suffering. Jesus literally put Peter back in his place when he said, "get behind me." In other words, "you're not in charge, Peter. I called you to follow me, not tell me what to do."

Then he announced to everyone, if they wanted to follow Jesus, they would have to be willing to lose their life for him. In doing so, they would gain the fullness of life that Jesus came to bring. Today's gospel asks some very profound questions. It starts off asking "who is Jesus?" It ends up asking "who are you?" "Are you willing to give everything for Christ?" You will have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Amen.

25th Sunday Ordinary Time B Cycle **Sept. 20, 2015**

INTRODUCTION (Wisdom 2,12.17-20; James 3,16-4,3; Mark 9,30-37)

In 333 BC, Alexander the Great conquered everything between Egypt and India. For a little over 250 years, the Greeks controlled all of the Middle East including the Holy Land. The Greek rulers decided all nations under their rule should accept Greek culture and religion. The Jews were being forced to give up their belief in Yahweh, the one God they had served (not always faithfully) for 1500 years. Those who did not submit were persecuted or killed. Some of the Jews converted to Greek ways and pagan worship and some stayed faithful to Yahweh. Our first reading is from the Book of Wisdom, and in the reading it is the Jews who turned to paganism who are speaking. They plot against the faithful Jew, sarcastically refer to him or her as "the just one," and ridicule traditional faith in God. The first reading connects with the gospel in that Jesus, who is truly the "just one," predicts the suffering he will have to face for remaining faithful to God's work.

HOMILY I don't know how many people play chess these days, but in the days before TV (if it's possible to imagine what the world was like way back then), and in the days before cell phones, ipads, etc., a person had to find a way of entertaining themselves. Our family enjoyed playing board games, cards and checkers. I especially enjoyed playing chess. For those unfamiliar with the game of chess, each player has 16 pieces and among those 16 pieces there are six different pieces, such as a king, a queen, castles, bishops, etc. The most important piece is the king. When your opponent attacks your king and he cannot be rescued, you've lost the game. The least important piece is a pawn. If your opponent captures one of your pawns, it could hurt you, but it's usually not fatal. I needed to explain this for the sake of a simple, but profound, lesson. The lesson is expressed in this old Italian proverb: "After the game, the king and the pawn go into the same box." In other words, no matter how important we are, or how rich or smart or successful, or how unimportant we are, we're all the same in one respect - death will take all of us. One person may be able to afford having a more expensive stone placed over his or her grave, but fortune gives us nothing which we can really own. The only thing we have that will truly be ours is the degree of love we've had for God and for others.

I think today's gospel is a perfect illustration of this truth. Jesus predicts, for the second time, the high price he will have to pay in order to be faithful to the mission that the Father sent him to do. Each of the apostles, on the other hand, are busy trying to prove which of them is the greatest. This was not just a childish game they were playing. Their discussion had real practical implications. They did not understand what the Kingdom of God really is. They imagined it to be an earthly kingdom where they would each have a place of importance. They were in the process of figuring out who would have the highest position in that kingdom, and the next highest, and so on.

Jesu's response to them was very gentle; he used a simple expression of affection for a child. In that culture, children were loved but they had no social standing and no rights. That's not much different to today's world where an infant has no rights, not even the right to live, until it is born. Using the child as an example of humility, Jesus says "if anyone wants to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all." Then Jesus went further. He said this child, the lowest member of the human race on the social ladder, actually represented Jesus. Jesus said: "whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me." Karl Barth describes what Jesus meant in this way: we are: "to think of every human being, even the oddest, most villainous or miserable as one to whom Jesus Christ is Brother and God is Father; and we have to deal with him (or her) on this assumption." Jesus' words should give joy and a sense of satisfaction to those who care for children: to parents, teachers, nurses and doctors, people who support the work of our schools, safety personnel like fire fighters and police, and pickets at abortion clinics.

You might wonder, does Jesus imply that we are to think of ourselves as having no worth or importance? Not at all. Jesus is interested in our being great, but he wants us to be great in the right way. We don't have to stand on a stage as if we're running for some office, touting our importance and brilliance and our qualifications. Nor do we have to hide our gifts and talents. Simply put, we should use them to serve others. Being great in Jesus' mind means to serve others. Jesus told his disciples at the Last Supper: "let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant." To emphasize what he said, he adds: "I am among you as one who serves." (*Lk. 22,26-27*)

26th Sunday Ordinary Time - B Cycle **September 27, 2015**

A few years ago, a movie came out entitled Ben Hur. Some of you might remember it. Ben Hur, whose full name was Judah Ben Hur, was played by Charlton Heston. Judah Ben Hur and his family lived well in the city of Jerusalem. Even though Israel was under the control of the Romans, the Jewish family of Ben Hur had pride, prestige and privileges. A series of misfortunes led to the loss of their privileged position and Ben Hur's mother and sister were sent to the dungeons where they eventually contracted leprosy. Judah himself was condemned to slavery and was to work in the Roman galleys. In a chain gang with other slaves, he was being marched through the countryside to his doom. On the way they paused to rest in a small village. A local man, quiet and strong, gave a cup of cold water to the exhausted prisoner, Ben Hur. Ben Hur looked up to see who was being so kind to him, and he found himself gazing into the eyes of Jesus of Nazareth. He remembered Jesus' look forever and the kind favor Jesus had done for him.

A number of years later Ben Hur won back his honor and his position. He returned to Jerusalem and to his old family house. One day, a noisy procession passed in the street as a man was jostled and pushed along to his public execution, carrying a cross. Ben Hur was filled with compassion for this prisoner, so exhausted and hardly able to walk. When the condemned criminal fell, Ben Hur moved forward to help and lift the fallen man. Their eyes met, and once again Judah Ben Hur looked into the eyes of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus' kind action offering Ben Hur a cup of water was rewarded by the compassion Ben Hur learned to have for others who were suffering.

As Jesus passed on his way to Calvary, his shadow fell across two leper women in the crowd, the mother and sister of Judah Ben Hur. They were healed of their disease.

The story is not in the gospel but it makes a beautiful illustration of Jesus' words in today's gospel: "If anyone gives you a cup of water to drink, he will most certainly not lose his reward." The kindness of Ben Hur in running to help a fallen man was rewarded immediately through Jesus' shadow healing his mother and sister.

Jesus is telling us every good deed, even the least, will bring good things to us. God is faithful and God is not going to let us get ahead of him in being generous. Jesus reminds us also in today's gospel that every evil deed will bring us harm and that's why he warns us to get rid of evil in our lives now. He does not want us to literally cut off parts of our bodies (we would all be going around with parts missing if he did), but he is telling us even if something is near and dear to us, if it causes us to sin, we must not delay in changing things around. Fortunately when we repent of our sins, God forgets the wrong we have done. But he won't forget our good deeds.

At the time of Jesus, the villages were rather small and people could better look out for one another. In our modern world we live in a village as large as the whole world and there are so many people in need that sometimes it's overwhelming. But we can't just close our eyes and hearts and we have to help as best we can with a cup of water or a kind word.

As people struggle under their crosses, we can reach out to help them. Looking into their eyes, we may see the eyes of Jesus of Nazareth.

There will be times when we are in need of a cup of water or a kind word or a helping hand. Hopefully, someone will be there for us.

We have hundreds of opportunities to do good throughout the day. I would be remiss, however, if I did not mention a few areas here in our parish where you can do some good if you wish to. We do not hand out bottles of water as I have heard some churches do, but we provide a first class education to children, many of whom could not afford it. One of the things that enables us to do this ministry is our bingo and we're always needing helpers at our bingo. We also need coaches for sports teams, helpers at our festival, people to sing in the choir, people to visit the sick and shut-ins and to do other apostolic work through the Legion of Mary and people to help the poor through CAIN and our St. Vincent de Paul Society. Another very good thing we do here is we pray. More things are accomplished through prayer than any of us can imagine. If you want to do some good for others, here are some ideas.

Whatever good thing we do will be a blessing for someone, but it will be a blessing for ourselves as well. Every little thing we do is important. Even if our love is not received in a grateful manner, we will not lose our reward.