

FIRST READING: Isaiah 50:5-9a

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

The Lord GOD opens my ear that I may hear; and I have not rebelled, have not turned back. I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; my face I did not shield from buffets and spitting. The Lord GOD is my help, therefore I am not disgraced; I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame. He is near who upholds my right; if anyone wishes to oppose me, let us appear together. Who disputes my right? Let that man confront me. See, the Lord GOD is my help; who will prove me wrong?

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 114:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9

***I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.***

I love the Lord because he has heard my voice in supplication, Because he has inclined his ear to me the day I called.

***I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.***

The cords of death encompassed me; the snares of the netherworld seized upon me; I fell into distress and sorrow, And I called upon the name of the Lord, "O Lord, save my life!"

***I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.***

Gracious is the Lord and just; yes, our God is merciful. The Lord keeps the little ones; I was brought low, and he saved me.

***I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.***

For he has freed my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. I shall walk before the Lord in the land of the living.

***I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.***

SECOND READING: James 2:14-18

A reading from the Letter of Saint James:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well," but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead. Indeed someone might say, "You have faith and I have works." Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: Mark 8:27-35

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark:

Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea Philippi. Along the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They said in reply, "John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others one of the prophets." And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter

said to him in reply, "You are the Christ." Then he warned them not to tell anyone about him. He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days. He spoke this openly. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. At this he turned around and, looking at his disciples, rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do." He summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it."

The Gospel of the Lord.

### **Reflection for the 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year**

How many times have people told us, "No pain; no gain?" It always sounds so unsympathetic. It's the truth. To acquire a new skill, to get into shape, to wear a mask in public and get vaccinated can be an uncomfortable, if not a painful means to a goal. I had to practice piano for an hour a day. It was a chore to learn new pieces to play, but I could sit for hours entertaining myself playing by ear. We all want the COVID pandemic to end. Keeping our eyes on the prize and not the process may be the motive we need to put up with inconvenience.

No pain; no gain is also the message of Isaiah's reading. His pain sounded right out as physical abuse. Was he a masochist who enjoyed the maltreatment and injury? What drove him and what upheld him in his suffering? God gave him a mission and a message that no one welcomed. Like many Sunday readings from our lectionary, this passage has no accompanying context. What was the message that God gave Isaiah to preach?

This passage is from the book of Isaiah. There are three different authors all having the name Isaiah. The book of Isaiah spans from before the Babylonian Captivity and Diaspora until the end of the exile nearly two hundred years later. The original or first Isaiah could not have lived so long. The book consists of sixty-six chapters. First Isaiah wrote from chapter one to chapter thirty nine, nearly half of the book. Second Isaiah, who may have been a disciple or a school of disciples of Isaiah, spans from chapters forty to fifty five. Third Isaiah is responsible for the rest of the book. Each has different content, themes and style. Since scripture is a reflection of history as seen through the eyes of faith, the details of who, what, where and when are not part of the book's purview. Proclaiming God's message to God's people was the collective Isaiah's purpose.

This passage is from Second Isaiah, chapter fifty. The People of God are in Exile and Diaspora. What was the message for which Isaiah experienced such persecution? He spoke of how God would restore the people to the Promised Land, restore the Temple of Jerusalem and the line of David as king. This sounds hopeful doesn't it? The people, however, received it as panacea or a magic bullet. It was like Isaiah was promising something no one could or would be able to deliver. It was like he was saying. "Don't worry, be happy!"

When would God do this? How would God do this? The people were adjusting, adapting to new lives. They were becoming citizens of a new world. When the restoration finally came, vindicating Isaiah and God's Word, only a remnant, two of the original twelve tribes did return. "Next year in Jerusalem," had become the promise made by Jews at the Passover Seder Meal for the other ten tribes. They were never lost. The exile ended, not the Diaspora. The rest of the

Jewish people were happy to remain living in the places that were now their lands and homes. They came to know that God's presence remained with them and not in a specific place.

This is the context of today's reading from Isaiah. It is part of today's lessons for a good reason. It is intimately connected to the Gospel. More about this later. This passage spoke deeply to the believers in Jesus that would in time be called Christians. The Church became a reality after Jesus' cross and resurrection. The community became the Church of Jesus after Pentecost. Easter and the gifts of the Holy Spirit changed it all. Believers can never go back to a world without Jesus and the Spirit's gifts.

The sufferings of Isaiah prophesied the suffering and death of Jesus. God's vindication of Isaiah when the remnant finally returned to the Promised Land prophesied the resurrection of Jesus. Capture and exile wasn't the end, restoration of the remnant continued the covenant. Death was not Jesus' end either. New life came out of Jesus' dying for him and us. The cross forgave our sins and redeemed us and Jesus' resurrection gave us the promise of eternal life. This may not have been the meaning that Isaiah intended, because of our faith in Jesus, it was God's intended meaning revealed through God's prophet.

Isaiah has used a specific image for the strength he found in God. "I have set my face like flint." Flint is a very hard mineral. It is a crystalline form of quartz that forms in sedimentary limestone or chalk. It is hard enough to strike sparks and is used in lighters. It can be formed into sharp arrow and spearheads. Being very hard, it fractures in even and clean lines. It can be very brittle as well as hard. Did Isaiah intend his image to show strength against his abuse or brittleness of the pain from it?

I like to think that he chose wisely in the image's ironic use. He endured and continued to preach God's Word; at a cost. God supported him through the pain. God's vindication came when the remnant returned; after Isaiah was dead. Life is tough, then and now. Isaiah experienced the meeting of rock and flint. God's chosen prophet did not escape life's pain and sorrow. Isaiah did not face them alone. God faced them with him. God faces ours with us.

James has a practicality about him. He's down to earth and tells it like it is. Prayers and words can be empty. Politicians' promises and advertisers' hype rarely make it in real life and needs. They have self gain as the purpose of their messages, get elected and make more money off us. James takes this observation a bit deeper. He directs our attention to our own behavior. It's always easier to spot another's faults than see our own. What do our prayers do? Do we expect God to intervene to fix the problems of the world and other people? Benign thoughts, sentiments and prayers can be empty too.

James is telling us to put our money where our mouths are. He's telling us to walk the walk and put our faith into our actions. It was easy for Isaiah to succumb to opposition and his personal pain. His faith in action was to persevere in his mission despite his personal cost. When we face troubles how do we put one foot in front of the other to continue? By the grace of those for whom we care and, in turn, those who care for us; remember, God cares for us too. God works through all those who love us and God works through us.

The closing line of mass in Latin, "Ite Missa est," needs some interpretation. We hear, in English, "Go, the mass is over." We translate "Missa" as the Mass. It is actually a form of the verb to send, mittere. It can also be translated, "Go, you are sent out." What we have just celebrated at mass, we bring with us back into the lives we actually live. We don't leave Jesus

locked up in the golden box of the tabernacle. We have just received Jesus in the Eucharist. Jesus leaves with us. As we digest the sacrament and it becomes part of our bodies, Jesus is already with us as he promised, to the end of the age. This is in keeping with the activist message James has given. How well do we bring Jesus into our world?

In the early 1970s, the musicals *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* hit the scene. The former portrayed Jesus as a clown and the latter had Jesus singing as a high tenor. Both of them caused quite a sensation and controversy. The Reverend Billy Graham said that anything that gets people to ask, who is Jesus does the work of the gospel. I think he was right. I liked the plays better than the movies.

Jesus asked his disciples two independent questions. Who do people say I am? Who do you say I am? The answers to each of these questions were independent as well. I like to point out that the terms disciple and apostle are very different. Mark has called the twelve disciples. A disciple is a follower, a student, or one who seeks mentorship from a wise one. The disciples are in the process of coming to faith. They are not on mission. An apostle is one who gets sent out. Missionary is a good English word for apostle. This passage is also out of context.

In previous weeks, chapter eight of Mark began with Jesus' miracle of the loaves and continued, last week, with the healing of a blind man. In both stories Jesus wanted the deeds kept secret. Jesus had a mission that went beyond the wonders he could work. Jesus is the Word of God, God made flesh. The first question was one of observation. People saw Jesus' miracles and describe him in the mode of a holy-man, prophet or wonder-worker. They couldn't see beneath what they saw to Jesus' divinity.

Peter's response indicated that he saw a deeper reality to Jesus' identity. Christ means God's Anointed One, in Hebrew Messiah. Peter responded with a name rooted in God. He did not call Jesus the Son of God. This is important. The disciples only had an inkling of Jesus' first nature and mission. This gospel was unfolding. Jesus had not yet died on the cross and had not yet risen from the dead. He had neither promised to remain with them until the end of the age nor returned to the father. He had not promised to return with the Kingdom of God when the end actually would come. The Holy Spirit had not yet graced the world. This was a pre-Easter and pre-Pentecost world.

After Peter professed what faith he had, Jesus told the twelve for the first time the true nature of his mission. Jesus, as the Christ or Messiah had to suffer, experience rejection and die. This was a horrible message and difficult for the twelve to comprehend let alone accept. They still saw Jesus as their buddy and leader, not the Risen Lord and Son of God. They had witnessed all of Jesus' wonders and heard Jesus preach. They weren't yet the Apostles; they merely witnessed the man Jesus so far. I'll say this again, this was the very first time that Jesus revealed to them his mission; the cross and resurrection. They could not grasp what they had just heard.

Peter, not wanting to lose Jesus and a mentor, leader and friend did the only thing he could to prevent Jesus' suffering. He rebuked him. From Peter's perspective, without witnessing Jesus' Cross, Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost, he acted prudently as he protected Jesus in the only way he knew. Yet from our perspective, in a post-Easter and post-Pentecost and as members of Jesus' Church, we know who Jesus really is and benefitted through Jesus' mission. Salvation of the entire human race was in no way in Peter's mind.

From Jesus' perspective, Peter posed a problem. Peter's words were a temptation that could divert Jesus away from his mission to fulfill God's plan of salvation. As the gospel of Mark began, John the Baptist baptized Jesus. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus went into the desert where Satan tested him. Peter's rebuke added to that test. Jesus responded not just to Peter but the twelve of them. Jesus could get frustrated too.

I imagine that the twelve were reeling and confused after Jesus' rebuke. What Jesus said next was completely unexpected. He all but told them that they would share his mission and die too. What is the cross that we are to take up? Remember, Jesus had not yet faced his. The Greek word for cross can also be a sign used to brand cattle, and X or a +.

Mark is often subtle in his use of ambiguity. Jesus has also told his disciples that they, through their simple but incomplete faith, already have been marked by God as believers. Taking up their cross does mean to accept the troubles that come. It also adds God has marked you for apostleship and will accompany you as you carry your cross. Jesus invited them to remain his disciples. "Follow me," is what disciples do.

The gospel ended with a further difficult saying; how to save or lose our lives. We, from our perspective as believers already know what Jesus meant. The twelve did not. Jesus died and rose from death. Jesus also invited them to their final witness; martyrdom. What kind of impact did Jesus' seeming enigmatic words have on the disciples and crowd? From what we know, we get Jesus message. To rise from the dead, one must first die, like Jesus. Jesus had just promised them eternal life. The promise would only be clear post-Easter.

The scriptures today do not have a comforting message. It is a challenging and painful one we have received; but only without faith. Isaiah was never disgraced. The grace of God was his support. James exhorts us to put our faith in action. We can do so because of God's gift of faith; we have the grace. Jesus promised suffering and death. Seen from the perspective of his own, there is the promise of hope in his resurrection. Despite their doubts and confusion, the disciples live forever with Jesus. Despite ours, their life is our hope. Jesus has invited us all, "Follow me." We have responded by our presence here now.

May our paths converge in Christ.

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