

Readings for the 1st Thursday of the Year II

FIRST READING: 1 Samuel 4:1-11

A reading from the first Book of Samuel:

The Philistines gathered for an attack on Israel. Israel went out to engage them in battle and camped at Ebenezer, while the Philistines camped at Aphek. The Philistines then drew up in battle formation against Israel. After a fierce struggle Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who slew about four thousand men on the battlefield. When the troops retired to the camp, the elders of Israel said, "Why has the LORD permitted us to be defeated today by the Philistines? Let us fetch the ark of the LORD from Shiloh that it may go into battle among us and save us from the grasp of our enemies." So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the LORD of hosts, who is enthroned upon the cherubim. The two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were with the ark of God. When the ark of the LORD arrived in the camp, all Israel shouted so loudly that the earth resounded. The Philistines, hearing the noise of shouting, asked, "What can this loud shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" On learning that the ark of the LORD had come into the camp, the Philistines were frightened. They said, "Gods have come to their camp." They said also, "Woe to us! This has never happened before. Woe to us! Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods that struck the Egyptians with various plagues and with pestilence. Take courage and be manly, Philistines; otherwise you will become slaves to the Hebrews, as they were your slaves. So fight manfully!" The Philistines fought and Israel was defeated; every man fled to his own tent. It was a disastrous defeat, in which Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were among the dead.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: PSALM 44:10-11, 14-15, 24-25

Redeem us, Lord, because of your mercy.

Yet now you have cast us off and put us in disgrace, and you go not forth with our armies. You have let us be driven back by our foes; those who hated us plundered us at will.

Redeem us, Lord, because of your mercy.

You made us the reproach of our neighbors, the mockery and the scorn of those around us. You made us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples.

Redeem us, Lord, because of your mercy.

Why do you hide your face, forgetting our woe and our oppression? For our souls are bowed down to the dust, our bodies are pressed to the earth.

Redeem us, Lord, because of your mercy.

Gospel: Mark 1:40-45

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark:

A leper came to him and kneeling down begged him and said, "If you wish, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched the leper, and said to him, "I do will it. Be made clean." The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean. Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once. Then he said to him, "See that you tell no one

anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them.” The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter. He spread the report abroad so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He remained outside in deserted places, and people kept coming to him from everywhere.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 1st Thursday of the Year II

History is always written from the point of view of the victors. So, why did the book of 1 Samuel record a series of defeats and cowardice? Every man fled to his own tent. The thinking of the defeated Israelites was odd too. We have just lost this battle. What can we do? They don't change their tactics or reinforce their battle plans and lines. They show magical thinking; let God sort it out. This can sound like a powerful act of faith but instead betrays naïveté and willful ignorance. The strategy they embrace is to take the sacred Ark of the Covenant into battle. They say, “God will win our battles for us!” God had other plans as God often does when faced with human hubris, folly and sin.

The saga and resolution of this will occur within chapter five of 1 Samuel. However, tomorrow's reading will not reveal the story's conclusion. To find out what happens, pick up the family bible and look it up; it's a powerful narrative of the true power of God. The rest of chapter four will lead to the events of chapter five. God heals and forgives both the Philistines and Israelites. As part of the results of this saga, the leaders of Israel, the Judges seek Samuel to anoint them a king so that instead of the voices of a committee and the leadership of many, the people would be led by one man who spoke with one voice. Today's defeat set the course for Israel's greatest King, David. A wider perspective can lead to know God's providence and grace.

On Tuesday, Jesus' miraculous healing of the possessed man led to people mistaking Jesus' mission of salvation to be a wonder-healer not their Savior. Having learned a bit from the experience, Jesus tried a different tactic. This didn't work too well either. His fame spread even more. So, instead of living in the open with people, Jesus retreated to empty and deserted places. This didn't work at all. People flocked to find Jesus for more healing acts. Jesus' compassion was deep. Jesus' vision of his mission, which was to die on the cross, was stronger for it showed his compassion for the entire human race not just a few sick people. Jesus, the eternal Word of God, as one like us, discovered the limits of his human nature. He had to find the right path to enter his glory.

Jesus remarked to the man after giving him some clear instructions, “that will be proof for them.” What did he mean? Proof of what? There are two things I see. The first and obvious had to do with the problem of contagious diseases; they can spread, like COVID Omicron today, with human contact. Lepers lived apart for a reason. There was no cure for it. Leprosy led to death. The process was long and horrible as one's extremities would fall off as the disease progressed over many years.

To deal with this problem, the ancients had their infectious disease mitigations; as do we. To be assured that the disease was gone and that they were free of symptoms, Mosaic Law had a series of actions that involved prayers, offerings, washings and examinations by the temple priests. The lepers had to prove to the priests that they were, in fact, free of the disease before they could leave quarantine and return to society, synagogue and family. The second was more

subtle. Jesus sought people's faith in him as Messiah, God and Savior. He intended his miracles to reveal his true self. Jesus intended this healing to prove that he was who he claimed to be.

This is not our concern for we, unlike the people of Jesus' day, believe that he is who he claims to be. We have the perspective of faith and we live in a post Easter and Pentecost Church. All of what we have known of Jesus was yet to happen. Jesus public life and ministry was not as the Risen Christ but as Jesus the guy from Galilee. There were no nail-marks in his hands and feet. Jesus had no halo or divine glow. He looked like we do; as an ordinary human being.

There are a few things I can gather from today's readings. Faith is not a panacea for our mistakes and problems. We have to face those things with faith. Faith cannot protect us as a shield from pain. We face pain by the grace of God by finding God's presence in the moments when we feel God to be absent. We live by faith, not our feelings. Faith can give us the strength to face what we fear. Faith, in the face of pandemic, people's prejudice, political and personal division is to know that God is near to broken, hard hearted sinners like you and me. God will never leave us and is only a thought away. In God we find what we need to do what we know is right. We can wear our masks, get our vaccinations, keep social distance and always see God's abiding presence in those we meet, in family, friends, neighbors, enemies and those we can't stand. Jesus came to save the entire human race, of which there is only one. For each of us is God's beloved daughter or son and we, as God's children, are all siblings.

May our mistakes become the path to God and in our sins may we experience God's forgiveness.

James D. Beath
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