

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B, September 16th, 2018

Isaiah 50:4c-9a

This is the third “song of the suffering servant” which prefigures what Jesus will take upon himself for our sakes: beatings, humiliation, disgrace, etc. Isaiah was writing to a people struggling for freedom from their Babylonian oppressors. They were eagerly anticipating Jerusalem’s glorious restoration.² In comparison with the first two songs, in this one, the darkness is heavier and the persecution more violent.¹

4The Lord God opens my ear that I may hear; The servant must first be a disciple, prayerfully receiving God’s word, before he can presume to teach others.¹

5and I have not rebelled, have not turned back. The servant has “not rebelled” and willingly accepts what God allows.³

6I gave my back to those who plucked my beard, my face I did not shield from buffets and spitting. It is not easy to determine whether the Prophet himself was persecuted.¹ This description of the servant’s sufferings impressed the early Christians and this part of the song was recalled when they meditated on the passion of Jesus and how “they spat in his face and struck him and some slapped him” (Mt. 26:67)⁴

7The Lord God is my help, therefore I am not disgraced; I have set my face like flint, The prophet sets his face against all opposition and finds the strength of flint in God’s will and help.⁵ **knowing that I shall not be put to shame.** Only because man stumbles and falls from the weight of his own weakness can he personally realize that God alone upholds him. Man must be locked in the prison of sinful weakness before he can confess that God’s strong arm frees him from every oppression. Sin and grace, sorrow and peace are constantly grappling with one another; God’s victory does not result from passivity but from struggle.⁵

8He 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.

9aSee, the Lord God is my help; who will prove me wrong? The conclusion is like the verdict of a trial: when all is said and done, the servant will stand tall, and all his enemies will be struck down. St. Paul refers to this verse when applying to Christ Jesus the role of intercessor on behalf of the elect in the suit pressed constantly against them by the enemies of the soul: “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect?” (Rom. 8:33)⁴

James 2:14-18

Today’s passage tells us that well-wishing to our neighbors has a hollow ring if the words of our lips are not matched by the action of our hands. Agreement with a set of Christian teachings, intellectually, is incomplete faith. True faith brings about a real change in our lives. If our lives remain unchanged, we do not truly believe the truths we claim to believe. Scripture tells us that even demons know who Jesus is, but they do not obey him. (James 2:19) Living the way God wants us to live does not earn our way into heaven,² for salvation in Jesus Christ is pure gift⁶. However, being obedient to the commands of Jesus Christ does show that our commitment to God is real. Christ-like conduct is not a substitute for, but a verification of, our faith in Jesus Christ.²

14What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?

By “works” is meant the obedient implementation of God’s revealed will in every aspect of life.¹ The implied answer to these rhetorical questions is “Nothing!” **Can that faith save him?** That is, can such a faith save him from judgment?¹

15If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day,
16and 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? Actions and works measure the genuineness of the Christian life; they show whether our faith and charity are real.⁷

17So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead. Such a faith is unable to save him for eternal life. James is not opposing faith and works, but living faith and dead faith.¹ The Vatican II document, *lumen gentium*, makes this very clear: “Even though incorporated into the Church, one who does not however persevere in charity is not saved. He remains indeed in the bosom of the Church, but ‘in body’ not ‘in heart’. All children of the Church should nevertheless remember that their exalted condition results not from their own merits but from the grace of Christ. If they fail to respond in thought, word, and deed to that grace, not only shall they not be saved, but they shall be the more severely judged.” Christian teaching also describes as “dead faith” the faith of a person in mortal sin; because he is not in the grace of God he does not have charity, which is as it were the soul of all the other virtues.⁷

18Indeed 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. This claims that where works might be supposed to exist without faith, a closer examination would show that faith underlies them.¹

Mark 8:27-35

This passage is the turning point of the gospel of Mark as Jesus reveals who he is and the disciples recognize him as the Messiah. It also introduces the theme of the suffering Messiah.¹

27Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea Philippi. Along the way This is the first of seven times in the next few chapters where mention is made of “the way” which depicts the steady movement of Jesus towards Jerusalem but on another level, Jesus is teaching that “the way” to heavenly glory is through heroic suffering.⁸ he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”

28They said in reply, “John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others one of the prophets.” Popular opinion agreed that Jesus was a prophet, but there was no consensus about *which* prophet he was.⁸ To the crowds he is Elijah or an ancient prophet come back but to Herod he is John the Baptist risen from the dead.¹⁰

29And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter said to him in reply, “You are the Christ.” Peter is the first human being to acknowledge openly that Jesus is the expected deliverer.¹ Peter’s profession of faith is reported here in a shorter form than in Mt. 16:18. Peter seems to go no further than to say that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. The Evangelist’s reserve may be explained by the fact that he was the interpreter of St. Peter, who omitted from his preaching anything which might appear to be self-praise. The Holy Spirit, when inspiring St. Mark, wanted the Gospel to reflect the preaching of the prince of the Apostles, leaving it to other evangelists to fill our certain important details.⁹

30Then he warned them not to tell anyone about him. Here we find the “messianic secret” where Jesus is trying to keep his identity from being known.⁶ It is not that others would not understand about him being the Messiah but he is not the kind of Messiah they are expecting for even the apostles have not yet grasped the essential—that the Messiah is the Son of Man who must suffer and die.¹

31He began to teach them that the Son of Man The “Son of Man” stands for the glorious figure in Daniel 7:13-14: “Behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days (God) and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.” **must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days.**

32He spoke this openly. Jesus spoke plainly and not in parables and it is clear in Peter’s response that he understood what Jesus meant.¹⁰ **Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.** This suggests that Peter still does not grasp that being the Messiah entails suffering and death for Jesus.¹

33At this he turned around and looking at his disciples, rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan. Peter plays Satan’s role by suggesting that Jesus should be the political liberator of popular expectations.¹ Jesus rebukes Peter for rejecting the prospect of suffering. Scandalized and perhaps frightened, Peter briefly aligned himself with the mind-set of Satan, who similarly tried to divert Jesus from his mission to suffer (Mt. 4:1-11; Lk.4:1-13). The Crucifixion proved to be a “stumbling block” to many of Jesus’ contemporaries.⁸ **You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.”**

34He 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. To the Christian reader, Christ’s cross is a symbol of the redemptive suffering which all his followers must bear.¹ The cross is a graphic image of suffering and carrying it refers to the Roman custom of forcing criminals to carry on their shoulders a crossbar to the site of their crucifixion. Jesus warns that disciples must be so committed to him that they are willing to endure persecution, hardship, and even death.⁸

35For 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.” Here the writer means that death can put an end to earthly life, but it cannot destroy eternal life. In other words, whoever wishes to save his earthly life will lose his eternal life. But whoever loses his earthly life for me and the Gospel, will save his eternal life.⁹ Jesus assures the faithful that they will find resurrection and glory beyond the hardships of this life.⁸

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) “St. Jerome Biblical Commentary,” (2) “The Bread of Life Catholic Bible Study” by Deacon Ken & Marie Finn, (3) “Workbook For Lectors And Gospel Readers: 1991” by Graziano Marcheschi with Nancy Seitz Marcheschi, (4) “The Navarre Bible: Major Prophets,” (5) “The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66” by Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P., (6) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers; 2006” by Martin Connell, (7) “The Navarre Bible: Catholic Epistles”, (8) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Mark” With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (9) “The Navarre Bible: St. Mark”, and (10) “Mark: Good News For Hard Times” by George T. Montague, S.M.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.