

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B

Isaiah 35:4-7a

The Israelites were scattered as captives to Babylon. This poetic passage envisions the return of Israel from exile by God's power.⁷ Isaiah tells how God, who manifested his presence and protection during the exodus, when Israel came up out of Egypt, will do so again in wonderful ways as the redeemed flock back home to Zion.⁶ This passage is filled with tremendous hope for all of us today as well as it was for the people in Isaiah's time. It is a beautiful picture of the final kingdom in which God will establish his justice and destroy all evil.⁵

Thus says the Lord:

4 Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, he comes with vindication; Acting as his people's vindicator, their next of kin, who would avenge the wrongs done to them, God visits the exiles, heals their sicknesses and makes them ready for the homeward journey to Zion.⁴ **with divine recompense he comes to save you.** This verse announces the coming of a new age, indeed, the coming of God among the Israelites in a new and wonderful way. The rest of the reading describes the wonders that will demonstrate the arrival of this new age, including lovely images of healing, restoration, fertility, refreshment, and plenty that begin to come to pass in today's gospel.¹

5 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, The most unfortunate among the exiled will be among the first to share these blessings.² **the ears of the deaf be cleared;**

6 then will the lame leap like a stag, The Lord's crippled people will be whole again.³ **then the tongue of the mute will sing. Streams will burst forth in the desert, and rivers in the steppe.** The steppe is dry, arid, treeless ground. St. Justin showed that this prophecy found fulfillment in Christ who is the stream of living water that flows from God; he sprang up in the desert wastes of ignorance of God, that is, in the parched earth of all the nations.⁶

7a The burning sands will become pools, and the thirsty ground, springs of water. The bleak times in our lives will be made into springs with the life-giving water of Jesus Christ.³

James 2:1-5

This section is a further explanation of the exhortation we heard last week to "be doers of the word." By faith, James means accepting Christ into your soul and thus into your life, where it produces good works as its fruit. He goes on to mention ten other things that faith does and today's selection concentrates on one of them: faith overcomes favoritism and prejudice.⁹

1 My brothers and sisters, show no partiality In Romans 2:11 we read that "With God there is no favoritism." He has no favorites for there is no partiality in God. God is simply no respecter of persons so despite all their privileges, the Jews will be no better off than the Gentiles, unless they do what is expected of them. In the Gospel (Mt. 22:16) even our Lord's enemies admit that he is impartial and does not make unfair distinctions.⁸ **as you adhere to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.** The great glory of the Lord in whom we believe should nullify all such impressions of worldly rank or status. Undoubtedly not all men are alike as regards physical capacity and intellectual and moral powers. But forms of social or cultural discrimination in basic personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language or religion, must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design.⁸ The bottom line is that if you treat the rich better than you treat the poor, you have not yet grasped the heart of Jesus' life and words.¹

2For if a man with gold rings and fine clothes comes into your assembly, and a poor person in shabby clothes also comes in, Both the rich man and the poor man are presented as strangers so that their social status is known only by their appearance.² Proverbs 22:2 tells us that “Rich and poor have a common bond; the Lord is the maker of them all.”

3and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Sit here, please,” while you say to the poor one, “Stand there,” or “Sit at my feet,” The Church was the only place in the ancient world where social distinctions did not exist. There must have been a certain initial awkwardness when a master found himself sitting next his slave, or, when a master arrived at a service in which his slave was actually the leader and the dispenser of the Sacrament.¹⁰ We sometimes forget that both Linus, who succeeded Peter as Pope, and Cletus who followed him as the third pope, were slaves.¹¹

4have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil designs? The poor are a special object of God’s care. The Church’s love for the poor is a part of her constant tradition. It is inspired by the Gospel of the Beatitudes, of the poverty of Jesus, and of his concern for the poor.⁵ (CCC 2444) In Matthew 25:31 we are told that it is by what they have done for the poor that Jesus Christ will recognize his chosen ones. When the poor have the good news preached to them, it is the sign of Christ’s presence.⁵ (CCC 2443) Love for the poor is even one of the motives for the duty of working so as to be able to give to those in need. This extends not only to material poverty but also to the many forms of cultural and religious poverty.⁵ (CCC 2444)

5Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Did not God choose those who are poor Poverty can be another word for human weakness and imperfection. **in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him?** “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” is the first Beatitude. One of the greatest barriers to salvation for the rich is pride. For the poor, it is bitterness. We must never assume that the poor will automatically go to heaven and the rich will go to hell. The poor, however, are usually more aware of their powerlessness and are usually more open to acknowledging their need for Jesus Christ.³ The early church attracted many people from the lower classes of society, but as this reading indicates, it had wealthy members too.⁷

Mark 7:31-37

31Again Jesus left the district of Tyre and went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, into the district of the Decapolis. Also known as the “ten cities.” They were predominantly Gentile in population and most of them were located east of the Jordan River. This setting indicates that Jesus continued to travel and minister in Gentile territory. We do not know how long the journey lasted, but it was through country where he was not known, so that the Twelve could get his undivided, undistracted attention.¹²

32And people brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment and begged him to lay his hand on him. Physical touch is important in Mark’s portrait of Jesus’ healing elsewhere, and it also figures importantly in this story which is found only in Mark.¹⁶ Scripture often shows the laying on of hands as a gesture indicating the transfer of power or blessing.¹⁵ The letter to the Hebrews lists the laying on of hands among the “fundamental elements” of its teaching. The Church has kept this sign of the all-powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit in its sacramental liturgies.⁵ (CCC 699)

33He took him off by himself away from the crowd. This reflects Jesus intention to conceal his identity. The “Messianic secret” is a leading theme in Mark. There are several reasons why he did

not want people to know that he was the Messiah: 1) He wanted to avoid a sensationalist reputation of being no more than a wonderworker. Publicizing his deeds by word of mouth comes with the danger that rumors will begin to disconnect his miracles from his saving message. 2) He wanted to sidestep popular expectations that the Messiah would be a political and military leader. 3) He did not wish to ignite the wrath of his enemies before the appointed time of his Passion.¹³ **He put his finger** In the language of Revelation fingers symbolized powerful divine action. In the hymn “Veni Creator Spiritus” the Holy Spirit is compared to the finger of the right hand of God the Father and he produces effects comparable to those of Jesus mentioned here.¹⁵ **into the man’s ears and, spitting,** Spittle was thought to have curative powers.¹⁴ **touched his tongue;**
³⁴**then he looked up to heaven and groaned,** God was working in him. Power went out from him.¹² **and said to him, “Ephphatha!”** This is an Aramaic word.⁷ **that is, “Be opened!”** The word is addressed not to the ears or the tongue but to the person himself.¹⁶
³⁵**And immediately the man’s ears were opened, his speech impediment was removed, and he spoke plainly.** This suggests what will happen to the disciples. Though they have been deaf (or at least hard of hearing) to what Jesus is saying, eventually they will come to hear God’s word clearly and will then be able to proclaim it to all the world.⁷
³⁶**He ordered them not to tell anyone. But the more he ordered them not to, the more they proclaimed it.**
³⁷**They were exceedingly astonished and they said, “He has done all things well.** This refers back to Genesis 1:31 where God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good. **He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”** This is a recognized fulfillment of our first reading: Isaiah 35.¹³ The Greek word chosen to describe the deaf man with the speech impediment is precisely the same word used by Isaiah in the prediction, “the tongue of the mute will sing.” The word is very rare, indicating the likelihood that Mark chose it with great care to show that Jesus was fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy.¹

Some of the material for this commentary is taken from: (1) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 2005” by Aelred R. Rosser, (2) “The Jerome Biblical Commentary,” (3) “The Bread of Life” by Deacon Ken and Marie Finn, (4) “The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1-59” by M. McNamara, M.S.C., (5) “The Catechism of the Catholic Church,” (6) “The Navarre Bible: Major Prophets,” (7) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 1997” by Lawrence E. Mick, (8) “The Navarre Bible: Catholic Epistles,” (9) “You Can Understand The Bible” by Peter Kreeft, (10) “The Letters Of James And Peter” by William Barclay, (11) “The Founding of Christendom” by Warren H. Carroll, (12) “To Know Christ Jesus” by Frank Sheed, (13) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Mark”, (14) “The Gospel of Mark” by William Barclay, (15) “The Navarre Bible: St. Mark”, and (16) “Mark: Good News for Hard Times” by George T. Montague, S.M.

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