

## Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B Readings and Commentary

Celebration Summary by Glenn CJ Byer, MA SLD: The interesting thing about the Scriptures today is how they call us to proclaim the kingdom of God in deeds more than words and in signs more than some royal decree. In these days of contracts and law suits over what is said, it is good to remember that for God what is said matters much less than what is done. God will let us know what the kingdom looks like through actions. This is why the praise that Jesus receives in the Gospel, "he has done all things well." is so important. Can the same be said of us? The Isaiah reading calls us to look and see our God coming to save us through wondrous deeds and those whose lives have been limited will find their senses renewed. The letter of James shows the importance of our deeds even within in the liturgy: we are not to treat people differently simply because of their wealth. Rather we are to be welcoming to those who have less material wealth because they have a special place in the kingdom of God.

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### **First Reading** Isaiah 35:4-7a

*The ears of those who are deaf will be cleared; and the tongue of those who are mute will sing.*

### **A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah**

Thus says the LORD:

Say to those whose hearts are frightened:

Be strong, fear not!

Here is your God,

he comes with vindication;

with divine recompense

he comes to save you.

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened,  
the ears of the deaf be cleared;  
then will the lame leap like a stag,  
then the tongue of the mute will sing.  
Streams will burst forth in the desert,  
and rivers in the steppe.  
The burning sands will become pools,  
and the thirsty ground, springs of water.

## **The word of the Lord**

### **Commentary: Isaiah 35:4-7a by Maribeth Howell, OP:**

This wonderful text from Isaiah is one that most of us are inclined to associate with the season of Advent and rightfully so. Of the four times that this passage is found in the Lectionary, only here does it appear outside of the Advent season.

It is quite possible that this entire passage, verses 1-10 of chapter 35, originated towards the end of Israel's exile in Babylon. If that is the case, then these marvelous words, associated with the prophet who has come to be known as Second Isaiah, were proclaimed to a people held captive in a foreign land, a people who most certainly must have questioned the saving power of God. The prophet's words are addressed "to those whose hearts are frightened" and they command these fearful hearts to "be strong, fear not!" God is about to act in way that we humans think impossible. Not only is God about to save this people, who are terrified (another translation renders verses 3-4a: "Strengthen the heavy hands and make firm the knocking knees. Say to the pounding heart: "Be strong, fear not."), but the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will dance and the mute will sing for joy!

The words from the book of Isaiah proclaim a message of healing and restoration. They speak of a time when all will be well. They challenge us to believe that the future can be

different and that the brokenness we experience in our world can be made whole.

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## **Second Reading** James 2:1-5

*Did not God choose the poor to be heirs of the kingdom?*

### **A reading from the Letter of Saint James**

My brothers and sisters, show no partiality  
as you adhere to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus  
Christ.

For if a man with gold rings and fine clothes  
comes into your assembly,  
and a poor person in shabby clothes also comes in,  
and 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,"  
have you not made distinctions among yourselves  
and become judges with evil designs?

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters.  
Did not God choose those who are poor in the world  
to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom  
that he promised to those who love him?

### **The word of the Lord**

**Commentary: James 2:1-5** by Fr. Damien Dougherty,  
O.F.M.: "Partiality" is a term that has its roots in the Old  
Testament (cf. Levit. 19, 15; Deut. 10, 17; Mal. 2, 9; Psalm  
82, 2) and has the substantial meaning of a regard utilized,  
unduely, towards someone. People who practice such  
favoritism go contrary to the will of God and place  
themselves outside the context of the faith.

What is being described, even if it may be only in a hypothetical manner, is a hurtful scene: even within the assembly of the Christian community, the rich person, whether the person who is concerned here is an occasional visitor or else a member of the same community, comes to be preferred over the poor individual. The best place is reserved for the wealthy; the indigent must be content to stand or sit at the lowest place (literally, "the running-board where I place my feet"). Such a fawning attitude before the wealthy reveals a hesitation, a shaking of the faith.

What James highlights here is that this discrimination between the rich and the poor reveals an implicit contradiction with our faith. For the person who looks through the prisms of faith, in the light of the faith, things appear in a completely different manner. The Gospel has been directed especially to the destitute who, consequently, are no longer to be considered needy; rather, their poverty becomes a wealth before God who assures the impoverished of the eschatological inheritance of the kingdom and that, once liberated from every earthly bond, they will adhere to God with love.

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### **Gospel** Mark 7:31-37

*He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.*

#### **A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark**

Again Jesus left the district of Tyre

and went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee,  
into the district of the Decapolis.

And people brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment

and begged him to lay his hand on him.

He took him off by himself away from the crowd.

He put his finger into the man's ears

and, spitting, touched his tongue;  
then he looked up to heaven and groaned, and said to  
him,  
"Ephphatha!" —that is, "Be opened!"—  
And immediately the man's ears were opened,  
his speech impediment was removed,  
and he spoke plainly.  
He ordered them not to tell anyone.  
But the more he ordered them not to,  
the more they proclaimed it.  
They were exceedingly astonished and they said,  
"He has done all things well.  
He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

## **The Gospel of the Lord**

**Commentary: Mark 7:31-37 by Tom Conry:** If you look at a map you'll immediately realize that the route that Jesus is supposed to have taken here is nonsensical. It's like going from Seattle to Portland by way of Boise and Yellowstone National Park. The place names are simply meant to tell us that now the reign of heaven is being proclaimed in Gentile territory.

The background of this story is undoubtedly Isa 35:5: "Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped." This verse exists as a kind of recurring subtext in Mark; it is referred to over and over in order to raise the question exactly who it is that really cannot hear and see. Is it people who simply cannot perceive sound, like the man in today's reading? Or is it those who lack understanding like the disciples, to whom Jesus cries out "Having eyes, do you not see? Having ears, do you not hear?" (Mk 8:18).

In an oral culture, of course, the ability to hear and to speak occupies quite a different and more important place than it does in modern Western culture. In the intensely oral

Mediterranean society, hearing mediated all interpretation, and the ability to speak represented the ability to be a member of society, which is why in popular literature of that time those who take a vow of silence generally moved out into the desert alone. This is not the story of a cure so much as it is the story of the restoration of a man to his community.

The irony, for which Mark is so fittingly famous, is that at the end of this Jesus requires the crowd to be silent. They cannot of course: what has been witnessed cannot be unwitnessed. Mark reiterates Jesus' attitude that nothing good comes from astonishment over miracles, but the people cannot help singing the old song about the deaf hearing and the mute speaking.

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