

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B

Celebration Summary by Dale J. Sieverding: The passage from Isaiah is the third of the (so-called) Suffering Servant Songs in what scholars call "Second" Isaiah. The servant may be considered the prophet himself or a personified Israel. The Servant is presented as one who accepts the message he receives and even though suffering persecution, does not show disgrace or fear. This suffering can be interpreted as the fate of the prophet or it can be a symbol of what Israel experienced in the destruction of Jerusalem and its exile from the Promised Land. The servant's role is to place emphasis on an important response to suffering which is, to trust God in spite of the negative reaction of those around him (them).

The passage from James is perhaps one of the clearest statements in the Scriptures of the continuing need for the community of faith to identify itself with the poor. It seems clear from this passage that the early church was tempted to identify with wealth and status, rather than the poor, which Jesus reminded his followers, would "always be with you." The passage clearly says that if we fail to aid the needy, we are not following God's law. The text demands action and a living out of the faith we celebrate and profess.

The Gospel passage confronts us with the dichotomies common to Mark. We are faced with both suffering and exaltation, defeat and victory, weakness and power, death and life. The dense apostle, Peter, shows the human reaction to a prediction of suffering. "On the one hand he refuses to accept the suffering, defeat and death; on the other, he readily expresses the desire to stay where the exaltation, victory and manifestation of full life are revealed." To be a true follower of Christ is to face both the pain of humiliation and the mourning of losing our selves in order to be conformed to Christ.

First Reading Isaiah 50:5-9a

I gave my back to those who beat me.

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.

Commentary Isaiah 50:5-9a by Virginia Smith: For Christians, it is all too easy to see in this passage Jesus' own passion, but it must be remembered that Deutero or Second Isaiah wrote these words sometime following the Babylonian Exile, centuries before Jesus' birth. Precisely who the writer had in mind when writing of a suffering servant remains one of the great biblical mysteries.

It is no mystery, however, that every reader can in some

sense relate personally to this passage, for suffering is universal and unavoidable. It comes to us all. Perhaps the best lesson we can take from this passage is that, although we cannot avoid affliction, we can control the way we choose to deal with it. A woman diagnosed with ALS provides an admirable example.

Although she knows that each morning she will awaken with less physical function than she had the day before and that this cruel disease will end in death, her faith has never been stronger. She sees before her, not death's insurmountable wall, but a gateway to eternal life with God. Surely she must sob into her pillow at times, but the face she presents to the world is one of steadfast trust in the God she has loved all her life. If only we could all do as well when the weighty arm of the cross cuts into our own shoulders. It may be then that we need to reread about Isaiah's suffering servant.

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Second Reading James 2:14-18

Faith, if it does not have works, is dead.

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.

Commentary James 2:14-18 by Virginia Smith: James' in-your-face bluntness can sometimes be almost comical, but there is no doubt as to his earnestness in this passage. Here we are confronted by the infamous faith versus works issue that has plagued Catholic/Protestant relations for centuries and has its roots as far back as the first century. Martin Luther even went so far as to have the Letter of James excised from the Lutheran New Testament (it was later replaced). Immeasurable amounts of blood have been shed by both sides trying to establish the primacy of one issue or the other when, in truth, it never was a question of either/or but rather both/and as James points out today. Works without faith are done in a spiritual vacuum while faith without works is, in James terminology, dead.

Homilists can come at this reading from a number of different directions. The most obvious may be the need for understanding both sides of any disagreement, particularly a religious one. That means grasping *accurately* and respecting another viewpoint without necessarily accepting it. This is of huge importance when dealing with interdenominational issues of any type.

Another way to help parishioners take in this reading is to show James as the New Testament counterpart of the Old Testament prophet Amos. Both were candid to a fault and very unlike most of their corresponding writers, demonstrating how God comes to us in so many different ways. Like our tastes in music, most of us respond better to one style of writing than another. The Bible presents within

its pages something for everyone. A loving God does whatever is necessary to reach and save his people.

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Gospel Mark 8:27-35

You are the Christ...the Son of Man must suffer greatly.

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.

Commentary Mark 8:27-35 by John Paul Heil: Main Theme: We encourage and share in the joy of all who repent of their sinfulness.

Jesus eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners not to condone their sinfulness but to invite and celebrate their repentance. He thereby also provocatively prods the Pharisees and the scribes to recognize themselves as sinners, whom Jesus likewise invites to repent.

In the parable about the shepherd, still having ninety-nine sheep does not deter the shepherd from leaving them and going after a mere one that is lost, contradicting a modern businessman's thinking nothing of a one percent loss. This parable calls for the Pharisees and scribes to identify with the joy of the shepherd who finds the one lost sheep, which characterizes Jesus' "welcome" of tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees and scribes are to see themselves in the ninety-nine "righteous" who think they have no need of repentance. Jesus invites them not only to share in his joy as the shepherd, but to cause even greater joy in heaven by recognizing and repenting of their own sinfulness.

The parable about the woman who finds the lost coin reinforces Jesus' invitation for the Pharisees and scribes, as well as for us, not only to share his and God's joy in the repentance of tax collectors and sinners, but to cause joy among the angels of God by repenting themselves.