

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time - B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Isaiah 50:4c-9a

Again this week we hear our first reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah; this time from chapter 50 which is in what has been called by some scripture scholars Second or Deutero-Isaiah. The division of Isaiah into two (or three) separate groupings [chapters 1 through 39, and chapters 40 through 66 (or chapters 1 through 39, 40 through 55, and 56 through 66)] is rather recent in terms of history. Until the 18th century it was presumed that Isaiah wrote all 66 chapters. Then, it was proposed that chapters 40 through 66 were written by a different author some 150 years later, during the Babylonian exile, with some scholars maintaining that yet a third author writing chapters 56 through 66. The reasons for separate authorship of chapters 40 through 55 are first of all historical. The addressees seem to be no longer inhabitants of Jerusalem, but exiles in Babylon. Jerusalem, in fact, has been captured and destroyed. Babylon is no longer a friendly ally, for she has destroyed Jerusalem and deported the Israelites. The former prophecies about Jerusalem's destruction have been carried out and Israel now awaits a new and glorious future.

Among the many finds in the Dead Sea Scrolls was a complete copy of Isaiah (all 66 chapters). There is no indication that anyone at the time of Jesus believed anything other than that the prophet Isaiah wrote all 66 chapters.

Today's reading comes from the section which has been titled "Hymns to the new Jerusalem" and is called "Israel in Darkness" and is the third song of the suffering servant.

^{4c} The Lord GOD opens my ear that I may hear; ⁵ and I have not rebelled, have not turned back.

The servant must first be a disciple, prayerfully receiving God's word, before he can presume to teach others.

⁶ 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.

Like the prophets before him, the servant, too, is ignored and even maltreated (Amos 7:10-17; Micah 2:6-10; Jeremiah 20:7-18).

⁷ The Lord GOD is my help, therefore I am not disgraced;

The word translated here has the same root as "buffet" and thus provides a strong contrast in the confrontation of good and evil.

I have set my face like flint,

A phrase frequent in prophetic preaching (Ezekiel 3:8-9; Luke 9:51). It has special meaning here when you picture a face covered with spittle.

knowing that I shall not be put to shame. ⁸ He is near who upholds my right; if anyone wishes to oppose me, let us appear together. Who disputes my right? Let him confront me. ^{9a} See, the Lord GOD is my help; who will prove me wrong?

2nd Reading - James 2:14-18

The Epistle of Saint James is one of the books which Martin Luther had eliminated from his Bible. He reverted the Old Testament from the Greek (Septuagint) to the Hebrew canon (which hadn't been determined by the Jews until A.D. 90 in response to the Christian use of the Septuagint) and he also tried to eliminate James, Hebrews, 2 & 3 John and Revelation from the New Testament. His followers did not go along with his New Testament changes. It has been postulated that the reason he wanted to eliminate James is that it clearly does not support his doctrine of salvation by faith alone as we hear in this reading.

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

This is a rhetorical question which implies the answer "nothing". A faith without deeds cannot obtain salvation (see Matthew 7:21).

Can that faith save him?

This does not imply the possibility of true faith existing apart from deeds – merely making such a claim appears to Saint John to be ludicrous. Obedient implementation of God's revealed will in every aspect of our life results in works.

¹⁵ If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, ¹⁶ 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?

The point of the previous analogy is now going to be made clear by rephrasing it.

¹⁷ So also faith of itself,

Unaccompanied by deeds, thus the contrary of "faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6).

if it does not have works, is dead.

Unable to save him for eternal life (James 2:14). The same Greek word for "dead" (*nekros*) is applied to sinful deeds in Hebrews 6:1; 9:14. Saint James does not place faith and works in opposition, but instead contrasts a living faith and a dead one.

¹⁸ 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.

Works righteousness (the heresy of Pelagianism) was condemned by the Church at the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431. One cannot “earn” or “work” their way into heaven. The gift of eternal life with the Father is freely given to all who will avail themselves of it. However, one must live the life of Christ if they expect to enter heaven. The corporal works of mercy are done, not because we are obliged to do them, but because we love Jesus so much that we want to do them. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

Gospel - Mark 8:27-35

This passage is the turning point in Mark’s gospel. It climaxes Jesus’ self-revelation with the disciples’ first recognition of Him as the Messiah. It also introduces the theme of the suffering Messiah. This reading corresponds in time to the point in John’s bread of life discourse where Peter acknowledges that Jesus is the Holy one of God; sent by God but not necessarily a messianic title.

²⁷ [] Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea Philippi.

The ancient town of Paneas, a place of the Greek god Pan’s cult in classical antiquity. The city (now barely a ruin) is located between a wall of rock and a set of beautiful waterfalls at the headwaters of the eastern branch of the Jordan River. It was a pagan city and on the top of the wall of rock was a white marble temple dedicated to Caesar and at the bottom of this wall was a sanctuary of Pan.

Along the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

Those outside Jesus’ circle (Mark 1:17).

²⁸ They said in reply, "John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others one of the prophets."

They have recognized that He has been sent by God as were those who are mentioned.

²⁹ And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?"

In contrast to “people”. They are the “you” to whom has been entrusted the secret of God’s kingdom while “those outside” have seen everything as a riddle.

Peter said to him in reply, "You are the Messiah."

The anointed one. The term “Christ” comes from the Greek while “Messiah” comes from the Hebrew; the meaning is the same. The term is used in the Old Testament in reference to the king and the priest. Peter is the first human being to openly acknowledge that Jesus was the expected deliverer. The woman at the well had speculated this, but the acknowledgment is not there.

³⁰ Then he warned them not to tell anyone about him.

By counseling His disciples to be silent, Jesus avoids false interpretations of His Messiahship and prepares for the three instructions which follow (Mark 8:31-9:29; 9:30-10:31; 10:32-45 parts of all of which we will hear in the coming weeks).

³¹ 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.

Jesus words now come as a commentary on Peter's announcement of revelation – they are an instruction on the sense in which He is to be understood as Messiah. They are not to tell others because, as yet, they do not understand the essential: the son of man, the Messiah, must suffer and die.

³² He spoke this openly.

Prior to this, Jesus met speculations about His identity with commands to silence.

Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

This is proof that, in spite of His calling Jesus “Christ,” Peter still doesn't grasp that this function entails suffering and death for Jesus.

³³ At this he turned around and, looking at his disciples, rebuked Peter and said,

This graphic detail indicates that Jesus' reply, although addressed to Peter, is intended for the others as well.

“Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.”

Jesus uses the same words he used to address the devil in the desert (Matthew 4:10). Like the devil, Peter is tempting him. He is not calling or naming Peter “Satan,” but telling him that like Satan, he is tempting Him. “Get behind me” is telling him to be a follower; he is not yet equipped to lead, he still has much to learn.

³⁴ He summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross,

A public teaching which alludes to Jesus' sufferings which He had made explicit to His disciples (verses 31-33).

and follow me.

Stay behind Him, be a follower.

Although describing His passion, He also shows that the Christian life, lived as it should be lived, with all its demands, is also a cross which one has to carry, following Christ. Jesus' words, which must have seemed extreme to His listeners, indicate the standard He requires His followers to live

up to. He does not ask for short-lived enthusiasm or occasional devotion; He asks for complete commitment. The goal He sets for men is eternal life. The present life should be evaluated in the light of this eternal life: Life on earth is not definitive, but transitory and relative; it is a means to be used to achieve definitive live in heaven. This is an example of our second reading.

“How hard and painful does this appear! The Lord has required that ‘whoever will come after him must deny himself.’ But what He commands is neither hard nor painful when He Himself helps us in such a way so that the very thing He requires may be accomplished. . . . For whatever seems hard in what is enjoined, love makes easy” [Saint Augustine of Hippo (between A.D. 391-430), *Sermons*, 46,1].

³⁵ **For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it,**

In the Greek and Latin vulgate, the word translated here as “life” literally means “soul.” Soul and life are the same when you consider eternal life.

but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel

The gospel is not a book but the good news about Jesus Himself.

will save it.

Whoever wishes to save his earthly life will lose his eternal life. But whoever loses his earthly life for Jesus and the Gospel will save his eternal life. We must seek and savor the things that are God’s and not the things of this earth (Colossians 3:1-2).

Verses 31 through 38 are Jesus’ first passion prediction and its consequences for discipleship.