

29th 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 53:10-11

As we learned before, scripture scholars have divided Isaiah up into two (or three) groups and attributed authorship of each group to different individuals (or possibly groups of individuals), although other than Isaiah, their identity remains unknown. The first century Christians, like their brother Jews, attributed all chapters of Isaiah to one author: Isaiah.

In the sixth chapter of his book (6:1-3), Isaiah describes his call to prophetic office: *“In the year King Uzziah died (737 B.C.), I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, with the train of his garment filling the temple. Seraphim were stationed above; each of them had six wings: with two they veiled their faces, with two they veiled their feet, and with two they hovered aloft. ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts!’ they cried one to the other. ‘All the earth is filled with his glory!’”*.

As tradition ranks the choirs of angels, the seraphim are the highest, the closest to God’s burning love, which is why they are called seraphim (it means “the burning ones”). The lowest are angels (guardian angels). Since the Hebrew language can not describe intangible things, and all angels (seraph and otherwise) are pure spirits, some form must be given them in order to describe them. In the case of the seraphim, they are winged serpents – dragons in the book of Revelation where the fallen seraph, Lucifer, is described. The snake in the Garden of Eden was also Lucifer, the winged (although not described) snake. Perhaps he is described without wings because he has fallen and can no longer fly.

The Seraphim are saying “Holy, holy, holy.” Again, the Hebrew language has no way of applying modifiers to words. They could not say “good, better, best”. In order to achieve emphasis or degree, the word was repeated. The number three was the number of completion. When we say the Holy, Holy, Holy in Mass, we are repeating the prayer of the angels as recorded in Isaiah 6:3 [and complete that prayer with “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest” (Mark 11:9-10)].

Today we hear from what has been called Deutero- or second Isaiah. Everyone has heard of the Suffering Servant Songs of Isaiah, the first being 42:1-4, the second 49:1-6, the third 51:4-44, and the fourth 52:13-53:12. Today’s reading is the conclusion of the fourth Suffering Servant Song.

Summary: Victory, although never enjoyed by the servant during his lifetime, is proclaimed.

¹⁰ [T]he LORD was pleased

A strong, determined love – a key word in the second part of Isaiah and occurs later in this verse where it is translated “the will of the Lord”.

to crush him in infirmity. If he gives his life as an offering for sin,

To understand what a sin offering accomplished (expiation of sins) we must look at Leviticus 16:15-22 and what it did not do – remove all sinfulness (Leviticus 16:7-10). The sin offering was a liturgical rite which sanctified the altar and holy places. It is a sacrifice for wilful sins. Phrases such as this accentuate the heavy sin consciousness of Israel; especially during periods of exile.

he shall see his descendants in a long life, and the will of the LORD shall be accomplished through him. ¹¹ Because of his affliction he shall see the light in fullness of days; Through his suffering,

The Hebrew text reads “by his knowledge”. By full union with a suffering people.

my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear.

He will share his own goodness with them and thus fulfill all divine promises. Although the servant’s innocence separates him from the rest of Israel, he always identifies himself with his sorrowful fellow men. His divine gifts become their means to salvation (Romans 3:2b).

2nd Reading - Hebrews 4:14-16

Last week we heard about God’s judgement and how He can discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart. This week we begin the section of the book of Hebrews which discusses how Christ, our high priest, is greater than the priests of the Mosaic Law. Our confidence is based on Christ’s high priesthood. He is the perfect priest because He is merciful and compassionate. As man, He has experienced the sufferings that affect us, although He was free from sin. Since He knows our weaknesses so well, He can give us the help we need, and when He comes to judge us, He will take that weakness into account. We should respond to the Lord’s goodness by staying true to our profession of faith. A Christian needs to live up to all the demands of his calling; he should be single-minded and free from doubts.

¹⁴ [S]ince we have a great high priest

This is the only place in the Letter to the Hebrews where Jesus is designated a “great” high priest. Usually, the author refers to him as “high priest” or simply “priest”. Here the designation indicates His superiority over the Jewish high priest, with whom the sacred writer constantly compares Him.

who has passed through the heavens,

Came down from heaven.

Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.

This confession is “Jesus is Lord” (Romans 10:9, 1 Corinthians 12:3). Jesus is mediator of the New Covenant just as Moses was of the old. He is High Priest like the priests of the Old Covenant prior to the golden calf and the creation of the Aaronite and Levitical priesthood.

¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin.

These testings (temptations) did not occur only once (see Matthew 4:1-11 for the temptation in the desert) but were a constant accompaniment of His life (see Luke 22:28). The only difference is that Jesus never succumbed to His temptations; unlike His followers.

¹⁶ So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.

The throne of grace is the ark of the covenant where Jesus’ offering to the Father is being offered continually (Revelation 5:6).

Gospel - Mark 10:35-45

This week we study Jesus’ third teaching on Christology and discipleship. Each of the other two teachings started with Jesus predicting His passion. The first prediction ended with Jesus telling Peter “Get behind me, Satan,” telling him to remain a follower and stop tempting Him. The second prediction “the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him and after three days he will rise” was not understood by His disciples and they were afraid to question Him about it – perhaps because of His reaction to Peter after the first prediction.

This third teaching also starts with a passion prediction, although it is not included in today’s reading. As way of background, let’s now listen to this third passion prediction and follow it immediately with the gospel reading. This is Jesus speaking:

“Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles who will mock him, spit upon him, scourge him, and put him to death, but after three days he will rise.” (Mark 10:33-34).

³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him and said to him,

Along with Peter they were the inner circle among the disciples. These three were the only ones present at the transfiguration, at the raising of Jairus’ daughter, and in the garden of Gethsemane. They should have known better than make the request.

“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”

In the parallel gospel (Matthew 20:20) their mother is the one who makes the request.

³⁶ He replied, “What do you wish (me) to do for you?” ³⁷ They answered him, “Grant that in your glory

It is not clear whether they yet recognize that Jesus must die and rise again. They may still be hoping for a messiah who will salvage the worldly kingdom and reign in glory on earth.

we may sit

The request recalls Jesus’ promise of twelve thrones (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:28-30).

one at your right and the other at your left.”

The places of honor when the messiah presides at the messianic banquet.

³⁸ Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I drink

The image of the cup is suffering and death (see Isaiah 51:17-22; Jeremiah 25:15). In Jesus’ case this is the third cup of the Passover meal, the cup of blessing, which started his passion – and the fourth cup, the cup of completion, which was drunk on the cross (the sour wine) which ended His passion (see Mark 14:36).

“I bless you, Lord, because you have granted me this day and hour, that I may be numbered among the martyrs, to share the cup of Christ and to rise again unto life everlasting, both in body and soul, in the immortality of the Holy Spirit. May I be received among them this day in Your presence, a rich and acceptable sacrifice, just as You have prepared and revealed beforehand and fulfilled, for You who are the God of truth and in You there is no falsehood” [Saint Polycarp of Smyrna (A.D. 156), as recorded in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 14 (written ca. A.D. 158)].

or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”

See Romans 6:3; Luke 12:50. Since suffering purifies the soul, Jesus draws the parallel with baptism which washes away sin (Isaiah 43:2).

³⁹ They said to him, “We can.”

This answer is full of irony considering their subsequent cowardice during the passion, although James was later martyred (Acts 12:2).

Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink, you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right or at my left is not mine to give but is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

Matthew 20:23 gives this prerogative to the Father. This saying implies some subordination of Jesus to the Father and was exploited by the Arians in early Christological debates. For whom these places are reserved is not clear.

⁴¹ When the ten heard this, they became indignant at James and John.

This verse attaches the following teaching about Christian leadership to the preceding story.

⁴² Jesus summoned them and said to them, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt.

Leadership is described as raw power.

⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant;

Note the contrast of leadership as service to the previous image of raw power. Just like the second instruction on discipleship, service is the key (*Anyone who wishes to be first shall be the last of all and the servant of all*) (Mark 9:35). The key to both passages is the Greek word *diakonos* (means “one who waits on tables”). [See Acts 6:1-6 for the ordination of the first deacons].

⁴⁴ whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all.

Even more humble than a servant.

⁴⁵ For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

(See Isaiah 53:11-12) Since the golden calf, the Israelites have been the slaves of God. They have been unable to approach God without an animal sacrifice. Now, through Jesus’ sacrifice, we are no longer slaves but sons of God (Romans 8:15-17).

“He is our sanctification, as Himself being purity, that the pure may be encompassed by His purity. He is our redemption, because He sets us free who were held captive under sin, giving Himself as a ransom for us, the sacrifice to make expiation for the world. He is our resurrection, because He raises up, and brings to life again, those who were slain by sin” [Gregory of Nazianz (A.D. 380), *Theological Orations*, 4,20].

“He shared with us our punishment, but not our sin. Death is the punishment of sin (Genesis 2:17). The Lord Jesus Christ came to die; He did not come to sin. By sharing with us the penalty without the sin, He canceled both the penalty and the sin” [Saint Augustine of Hippo (between A.D. 391-430), *Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons, For the Easter Season*, (No. 231,2)].

Summary: Our attitude should be that of our Lord: we should seek to serve God and men with a

truly supernatural outlook, not expecting any return. We should serve even those who do not appreciate the service we do them. This doesn't make any sense if judged by human standards but the Christian identified with Christ takes pride in serving others – by doing so he shares in Christ's mission. If Jesus is truly King, then we must be His willing servants, willingly doing His bidding.