

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time B - *Believe what you read. Preach what you believe. Practise what you preach*

September 5, 2021

The story is told of Saint Francis of Assisi going down to a village with one his monks. Their purpose was to preach the Gospel. When they arrived they quickly engaged the local folk in conversation and passed their time helping the villagers with their work, sharing stories, entering into the life of the community. At the end of the day, Francis said to his companion that it was time for them to return to the monastery. They were about to leave the village, when Francis' companion, with great concern, said, **“Didn't we come here to preach the Gospel to these people? When are we going to start?”** Francis turned to his brother monk and said, **“If these people have not heard the Gospel today, then reading from the Bible will not make any difference to them! Your deeds may be the only sermon some people hear today.”**

The letter of James states it more plainly (2:1-5): **Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.** For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, they are doers blessed in their doing. James has been seriously misunderstood, and criticized for apparently advocating a **“theology of works,”** holding the view that salvation is possible through doing “good works.” The statement that usually gets James into trouble is this: **“So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”** (James 2:17). For James, the “doing” of “good works” is nothing more nor less than hearing by observing and feeling the Good News and understanding its implications. In other words, **those who hear the Gospel and understand its message will quite simply be moved to do the work of Jesus Christ and continue that work in their own communities.** We must never forget that what we hear and what we say determine to a great extent what we do and they make us the persons we are!

In the reading from Mark's Gospel (7:31-37), it is a precise picture of Jesus “in action,” bringing healing to a man who had been deaf and mute. **Spiritually, the reader or listener becomes aware of a power beyond themselves who nevertheless works in their midst to alleviate suffering.** It is important to remember that people such as the deaf-mute and lepers and the physically “objectionable” were effectively excluded from any kind of public access to God through the temple. The advent of Jesus meant that the outcast and marginalized suddenly – perhaps for the first time in their lives – had direct access to God. At the same time, the gracious approach and touch of Jesus holds a significance that goes far beyond mere compassion and “nice-ness.” It was a powerful indication to the people of the time who were able to “read the signs” and understand the metaphors and allusions behind Jesus' actions, that **God was working in their midst to bring about the time of peace that had been spoken of and promised centuries before.**

In the words of today's reading from the Hebrew scriptures (Isaiah 35:4-7a): ***Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.*** Isaiah was writing for the people in exile in Babylon, offering them hope that they would return to their own land promised and given by God. Yet the quotation from Isaiah is also understood as words of hope for exiles of every time and place. And there are perhaps no worse exiles than those who are estranged from the living God. There will come a time when what is wrong will be righted. Mark understood Jesus, the Son of God, as bringing in the time spoken of by Isaiah. That is the nature of the Good News for Mark – **that in Jesus what is wrong with the world is being made right, what is broken is**

being made whole, what is afflicted is being healed. And so Mark makes a connection between his present and the chaotic world of the prophet Isaiah. Nevertheless, the continuing spiritual reality is that the story does not end with Mark's Gospel. It does not end with any of the Gospels. Rather, **the story of the Good News continues right through to today, here and now, in the presence of God's people in places where there is distress, injustice, affliction and all that is contrary to God's purpose and vision for a saved humanity.**

Centuries ago, James understood this call to continuing action. His words remain as true today as they were when they were written. When Christians seek the lost, comfort the grieving, and heal the sick, they are neither acting for their own sake, nor because they are "nice" people. They are certainly not acting because they believe they can earn their place in the kingdom by what they do. No, **Christians do these things because they are called to continue the work of Jesus. They share in his ministry and take the message of the Good News into the places where people are unable to hear it for whatever reason. They take the message to places where people have no voice, among them the poor and the powerless.** The mute and deaf are not just historical figures from first century Israel, they are the whole human race. Jesus is telling us the greatest tragedy of all is not to be born deaf and dumb, but to have ears and fail to hear and have tongues and fail to speak. For in today's world, the deaf and the mute are found everywhere, even in the church. **We are the deaf and dumb who need to be brought to Jesus for his healing touch, which brings communication where there are silences, companionship where there is loneliness, and encouragement where there is despair.** Mark's Gospel is a reminder of God's will that suffering should not be the common condition of humankind. The letter of James reminds the faithful that they have an essential share in exactly the same work as Jesus. In a sense, when the faithful accept their calling and engage the ministry of Jesus, they actually become Jesus, and the Kingdom of Heaven is once more brought near – every time, and in every loving, care-filled, compassion-saturated action.

In the Rite of Ordination of Deacons, after the candidates prostrate themselves before the altar, as a sign of abandonment to the love of God, a sign of unworthiness to be called his friend, and a sign of total dependence on him, they will be clothed in the Deacon's stole and Dalmatic. This will remind them that these vestments cover up human frailty and inadequacy, reminding them that as Deacons the message they proclaim is not themselves, but Christ crucified. The ordination of Deacons concludes with the presentation of the Book of the Gospels, the word of life and love on which their lives and ministry will be based by the presiding Bishop. The new Deacons will learn very quickly that God's word is not authentically proclaimed just by standing in a pulpit, it is preached in the holiness of the actions of our lives. That is why the words spoken by the bishop during the presentation of the Gospel to the newly ordained Deacon are both a comfort and a challenge: ***Believe what you read. Preach what you believe. Practise what you preach.*** In the words of Saint Francis of Assisi: ***Jesus is happy to come with us, as truth to be spoken, as life to be lived, as light to be shared, as love to be followed, as joy to be given, as peace to be spread about, as Sacrifice to be offered among our relatives and friends, our neighbours and all people.***