

## Twenty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time

Rarely do we have a Sunday when all the readings, including the Responsorial Psalm, have such a clear focus on the one theme. Let us begin with the Gospel. It is taken from the Gospel of Mark (7:31-37). As you probably know, almost every verse in Mark is found in the longer Gospels of Matthew and Luke. This is one of the rare scenes that is found only in Mark – which fact alone gives it a special interest.

The scene happens in Gentile territory. Throughout his ministry Jesus has been pleading for people to listen to the word that he is preaching (4:9,23; and possibly 7:16). Throughout the section of the Gospel from which this scene is taken we have seen group after group who are deaf to Jesus' words. Now finally this man stands before us. He can do nothing for himself. He does not even belong to the group who consider themselves God's chosen people. The crowd, however, ask Jesus to come and heal him. Jesus does so, thus fulfilling the hopes of Isaiah for the Messianic age recorded in today's First Reading: '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'(Isaiah 35:5-6)

Jesus takes the man away from the crowd. The man is deaf, so Jesus communicates with touch. Tradition tells us that Peter was the main source for Mark's Gospel. It is interesting to note how often Mark speaks of Jesus' touch (1:41; 3:10; 5:27-31; 6:56). God's grace sanctifies every aspect of our humanity, and God's healing Spirit acts through Jesus' feelings, and his eyes and touch, for we are flesh and blood and need to experience grace in our bodies. Jesus' disciples learned to love him through the intimacy of their day-to-day contact with him.

John begins his First Letter with the following words: 'We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete' (1John 1:1-4).

People needed Jesus' healing touch to enable them to listen to the gospel which he was sharing with them, and to believe that Jesus' baptism experience was meant for them too. As we contemplate Mark's gospel, let us pray for each other that we, too, may recognise our complete dependence on grace and plead for God to touch our minds and hearts and bodies with healing love. Of ourselves we, like Jesus' disciples, cannot grasp the mystery of God's loving action in our lives. We need the miracle of his healing touch.

We have already mentioned the First Reading, in which Isaiah speaks of God's action of grace in the world – the healing touch which God will exercise through his Messiah. The Responsorial Psalm accents the same truth. God is described as the one who keeps guard over truth and who does justice towards the oppressed. The psalmist goes on to say that 'God loves the just' – that is to say God loves those who, like Jesus, act towards the oppressed as mediators of God's healing touch. God, who is described as the one who 'protects the stranger', loves those who protect the stranger and show hospitality to those seeking refuge.

All of this is powerfully expressed in the Second Reading from James who warns us not to treat people according to their position in society or their likeness to ourselves. We must not judge people according to how attractive we find them, or, through fear, reject people because they are different or unattractive or not in a position to improve our lot. To judge in this way is to judge in a corrupt way. It is to fail to love God and so to fail to enjoy 'the promises made by God to those who love him'.

There is much in these readings for us to take to heart. If we find ourselves deaf to Jesus' words, we must realize how desperate is our situation. We must ask Jesus to take us aside and heal us, lest we live and die having given lip service to the faith but having failed to live it in an authentic way. Jesus alerted us to the folly of gaining the whole world while losing our souls. To fail to heed the message of today's readings, is to get caught up in the kinds of fears that find all too much space on our air waves and to close our hearts to the oppressed and the strangers. It is to reject Jesus and all he stood for. It is to make a sham of our religious practice. God is not fooled, even if we can manage to fool ourselves. Our lives will be judged on what we do about the instructions offered to us in today's readings.