

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 24th Sunday (B)
Isaiah 50: 5-9a Psalm 59 James 2: 14-18 Mark 8: 27-35
By *Jude Siciliano*, OP

Dear Preachers:

Isaiah wrote four “Servant Songs” in the section called “the Book of Comfort” (chapters 40 – 55). Today we hear the third “song.” The person speaking sounds like someone who is trying to be faithful to a God–given mission which has brought suffering.

Suffering tests our faith and our relationship with God. “If God loves me why am I suffering?” In cases of illness and misfortune we usually don’t have any choice in the matter. But the suffering the servant is undergoing is exactly because he/she is God’s servant. Suffering that comes as a result of a mission can usually be avoided – just give up the mission and quit the scene. But the servant wants to be faithful because, “The Lord God opens my year that I may hear.” Somehow this servant has heard that his/her suffering is for the cause of right and therefore believes that God will not abandon the one trying to be faithful.

Doing the right thing doesn’t guarantee we will succeed: it’s not about success, but about being faithful. But how can we be faithful when suffering is the price we must pay? How will we not yield and turn in another direction? This servant has a piece of wisdom for us, “The Lord God is my help; therefore I am not disgraced.” Who is this servant who speaks from the distant past, centuries before Christ? It could be a person trying to practice God’s ways amid a disbelieving and hostile world. It could be the people of Israel, long–suffering in exile, in a world far from their own, not only in language and customs, but belief as well. It could be a prophet, perhaps Isaiah himself, meeting opposition for speaking on behalf of God.

All of the above could be easily said of each of us. This worshiping community could also be the suffering servant, trying to live lives of faith in a world characterized by cynicism and opposing values. We Christians can also apply what is said of the servant to Jesus himself, who set his face “like flint” towards Jerusalem, preaching the gospel the Spirit had anointed him to proclaim. He would be faithful to his message, despite those who would, in Isaiah’s words, beat him and pluck his beard.

The gospel today is a turning point in Mark’s Gospel and questions about the identity of the servant of God take another shape. From now on Jesus will shift his

attention from the crowds to the formation of his disciples. It seems as if they have begun a brief, but intensive course in discipleship; a training that will take them to Jerusalem and beyond. Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Maybe the answers he receives will help him clarify his mission. He doesn’t explicitly identify himself with Isaiah’s suffering servant, but his announcement about his forthcoming suffering certainly makes the link. Just as in the case of the Isaian servant, Jesus’ own suffering will come as a result of being faithful to the mission God has given him.

On his way to Jerusalem Jesus wants to be quite clear what awaits him and his disciples – if they continue to follow him. Jesus’ way to focus the disciple’s attention and understanding is to ask them questions. The questions he puts to them are also asked of us. Our response to Jesus’s question reveals not only what we believe about him, but how we will respond to him. What difference will what we profess about Jesus made in our daily lives?

Jesus’ disciples have answers for him; but they don’t go far enough. He isn’t just another great prophet, or a very good person among many others in the history of the world. Yes, he was a great prophet. And yes, he is the Christ, the Messiah. But not the kind who will guarantee Israel’s return to greatness and worldly power. His will not be triumph and domination; quite the contrary, he speaks of rejection by their own religious leaders, “the elders, the chief priests and the scribes.” What kind of religious leader is that!

Like Isaiah’s “Suffering Servant” – Jesus will suffer for what is right. I know a man who quit his job, took a big pay cut and was even unemployed for a while because he didn’t like the way his company deceived its customers. I know a woman who decided to work for a church despite her business-world credentials because, as she said, “I want my life to have purpose.” I know an auto mechanic who, if he finishes a job sooner than he anticipated, will charge his customers less than his original estimate. I know a college student who heard that her classmates had gotten a stolen copy of an upcoming test. She refused to look at it, even though her grade suffered. When hearing about these people and others like them, who suffer loss for doing the right thing, some say to them, “What are you nuts?! Everyone does it.” Well, not everyone. There are some who, like Isaiah’s servant, can say, “The Lord God opens my ear that I made hear; and I have not rebelled, have not turned back.” Like Jesus himself. He is trying to give his disciples a new vision. He tells them that they can never understand him without also accepting rejection and suffering as an indispensable part of their mission and identity.

The Letter of James is very clear: if you have had your ears opened; if you have believed the gospel message, then there is only one response to make in daily life, “act on what you have heard.” Jesus’ life and message have opened our ears and so, like him, when we see or hear of someone in need, we must respond. If we don’t, James is right, our faith is dead – and what good is that?

A recent trip to the eye doctor comes to mind. To test my vision, she kept putting different lens in the instrument I was looking through. There were those familiar mixed letters and numbers projected on the wall across the room. “What do you see?” she kept asking me, as she replaced one lens with another. Gradually I could see more clearly. Jesus is like that eye doctor. He has questions to ask his disciples in order to help them get a clear picture of who he is. When their answers reveal blurred vision, he will put another lens before them to improve their spiritual sight. He will do this through his instruction, healings and his suffering and death. Finally, when he is raised from the dead their vision will be clear and they will be able to say, “I can see clearly now.” But because they are human, in the future this sight will be blurred and sometimes even blinded by other lights.

Aren’t we just like them – we as a church, a worshiping community and as individuals? In our history our church has opted for grandeur and comfort; made alliances with repressive governments; suppressed inquiring minds; approved of slavery; blessed armies; burned heretics; suppressed the gifts of women, etc. During those past and these present times of distorted vision, we need visionaries, saints mystics and prophets to challenge and clarify our sight. By their lives and prophetic preachings they have asked us, “Who do you say Jesus is?” Then they pushed us to live the faith we profess with our words and doctrines. Like James, in our second reading, they reminded us that faith without works is dead.

The answer to Jesus’ question, “But who do you say that I am?” can only be answered by a community that continually returns to what the first disciples came to see in Jesus. Their clarified vision has been set down for us in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as well as the writings to the first Christian communities we call the Epistles. Our worship today is one way for us to hear what those early disciples came to believe when they got their vision cleared. Their faith focuses our faith at this celebration and the vision they have passed to us is nourished when we receive the eucharistic meal which is Christ himself.

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. "Faith Book" is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today's Isaiah reading:

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.

Reflection:

Doing the right thing doesn't guarantee we'll succeed. It's not about success, but about being faithful. But how can we be faithful when suffering is the price we sometimes must pay for doing what is right? What will keep us from yielding and turning in another direction? Isaiah has a piece of wisdom and assurance for us today, "The Lord God is my help; therefore I am not disgraced."

So, we ask ourselves:

- Have I ever suffered or been penalized for doing what was right?
- What gave me the determination and strength to stay the course?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

[Sometimes these reflections are specific to Sacred Heart Parish, the Raleigh, N.C. cathedral. We publish them to suggest social justice possibilities in your own parishes.]

"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 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. (James 2:14-18)

The task of caring for our brothers and sisters belongs to every believer and every parish. The pursuit of justice and peace is an essential part of what makes a parish Catholic. "Our parish communities are measured by how they serve "the least of these" in our parish and beyond its boundaries (the hungry, the homeless, the sick, those in prison, the stranger (cf. Mt 25:31). **A parish cannot really proclaim the gospel if its message is not reflected in its own community life.**" (US Catholic Bishops *Communities of Salt and Light*)

Did you know?

Every Wednesday and Friday afternoon Raleigh's poor receive help and encouragement through the parish **Open Door Ministry**. Many parishioners support this ministry through donations to "The Door Fund" and through any contributions deposited in the envelopes in the back of the church.

Sacred Heart parishioners feed the hungry every 2nd and 3rd Saturday at **Moore Square**.

Our parish provides the Tuesday and Friday evening meals to homeless families in the **WIHN program**. during 12 weeks each year.

Parishioners prepare and serve a meal monthly to the women residents of the Helen Wright Shelter.

Sacred Heart provides volunteers to **Catholic Parish Outreach** to help serve those who come in need.

Our parish **Prison Ministry** is active in providing emotional and spiritual to women at the Women's Prisons and to those preparing for release.

Our **Aids Ministry** team is active in helping "care partners" suffering with HIV/AIDS.

Sacred Heart partners with **Passage Home** to support it's work of mentoring families in need of housing.

Following the model of **Katrina Support Circles**, Sacred Heart offers support to several local families in need.

Our parish's **Global Outreach Ministry** is exploring ways to offer assistance to those beyond our borders and to refugees in need of assistance.

Our parish **Gabriel Project** offers support, resources and life alternatives to pregnant women.

What you can do:

- Be part of the many ways Sacred Heart cares for those in need. Call the parish Social Ministries Office 865-8966 to volunteer for one of our many ministries.
- Pray that our parish will continue to put its faith into good works for those most in need.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

- Rodney Taylor #0472274 (On death row since 10/23/98)
- James King #0226428 (11/23/98)
- Jeffery Meyer #0280127 (2/4/99)

----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

"First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, [Click Here](#).

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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