

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 7th SUNDAY (B)

Isaiah 43: 18-19,21-22, 24b-25 Psalm 41 2 Cor 1: 18-22 Mark 2: 1-12

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The people Isaiah was addressing were paralyzed. Their limbs may have worked fine, but their spirits were debilitated for they were exiled in Babylon. They remembered what God done by delivering them from Egyptian bondage. Now they were discouraged, wondering why God wasn't doing again for them what God had once done – get them out of captivity. What was taking God so long? Didn't God see their paralytic condition? They were a people unable to move yet yearning to return to their land and live as a free people. In our selection today we hear God speaking to the people through the prophet Isaiah, trying to turn them from their present despair and give them hope.

Isaiah is a voice of encouragement, telling the exiles that a new deliverance was about to take place for them. They would be freed from their captivity and travel again across the desert as they once did when they were led out of Egypt. “In the desert I make a way, in the wasteland, rivers.” God promised that they would be set free from the paralysis inflicted on them by their captors.

Isaiah also reminds them that their own sin got them into their current enslavement. So, if God were going to deliver them, God would also have to forgive them the sins that got them enslaved in the first place. In other words, they had not only been exiled from their homeland, they were exiled from God. The people needed to make two journeys back home – one to Israel and the other to God as well. But God would have to take the first steps in their direction and not only deliver them from slavery but also forgive their sin. In God's presence they would find wholeness of body and spirit. Which takes us to the gospel.

In today's gospel story Mark reminds us again of the basic good news: God heals, and God forgives. Mark tells us that Jesus didn't just respond to the paralyzed man's faith, instead, he was moved by “their faith.” A small community of compassionate people brought the paralyzed man to Jesus, and he responds to these believers who reached out to help one of their own. Note the trouble they went through, they opened a hole in the roof and let the man down in front of Jesus and his critics!

Couldn't we all use good friends like these? When life is too much for us and when our faith feels paralyzed, we need supportive believers who reassure us and carry us for a while until we regain our own footings in faith. We are bound together at this Eucharist with those gathered with us, linked with each other through a common faith, prayer and mutual support. Like the man, we have companions who are willing to carry us, when we need it, till we find help. Whatever the paralysis we experience, we have good company. This eucharistic celebration is a good time to offer thanks for those people who stood by us and carried us for a while when we were immobilized by fear, doubts or hardships.

We can also ask ourselves today: when and for whom can we be a support? Whom do we know in need of a strong arm and the reassurance of faith? I know a woman whose husband died, and the sudden loss left her stunned and, in many ways, as paralyzed as the man on the mat. She would go to an early Mass and sit quietly by herself. She said she was numb and, while in church, she didn't feel any rush of faith and relief, she "leaned" on the faith of the other worshipers around her. "I didn't want to pray those prayers and sing those hymns, but they did – and with gusto!" She added, "I went to Mass that way for months until I could, at last, voice the prayers and sing hymns again with them." She let those believers around her carry her to the feet of Jesus until she was able to walk on her own. Now she is a leader of the parish bereavement group because she wants to help others in their grief and wavering faith – as she was helped by those believers she met at church.

We don't usually become friends with many people with whom we worship each Sunday; but in many ways they are our anonymous partners in faith who join us as we gather at the feet of the One who teaches, forgives and heals. We all go through brittle periods when our faith feels about to crack under the stress of one of life's surprises. At these fragile times haven't we been helped by the faith of those around us in the pews; or by another parishioner we meet and share our lives with in the supermarket; while walking the dog or attending a social event? They probably have no idea that their faith has carried us for a while, they were there at just the right time for us. Who sent them to us? Who sent Isaiah to the exiles?

We may not consider ourselves champions of faith, but don't you wonder how many others, known and unknown, have been encouraged in times of need by our example? Perhaps its because we "show up" – we are constant and regular in our attendance at the community's prayer and ritual. No, we may not feel like models

of faith, but who knows whose faith has been strengthened by ours? Who knows whom we have unknowingly carried to Jesus for healing, comfort and strength?

There is a lot going on in today's gospel story, but one message comes with clarity and force: by healing the paralyzed man, which the people could see done, Jesus proved he had the power to forgive the man's sins – which they could not see. We could ask Mark today, "Who is Jesus?" He responds through this story: Jesus is the powerful one who forgives our sin. No sin is beyond his healing word, no matter what we have done, or how long we have done it. Can we believe what Mark is telling us – that through his word alone Jesus can heal, forgive sin and restore us to the community sin has separated us from?

We carry with us a list of "What ifs." What if I hadn't done that? What if I had known then what I know now? What if I hadn't chosen the path I did? If I made such a mistake then, how do I know I won't repeat it now? I thought I was right then, am I right now? Replaying the past can be paralyzing for our present, can affect our relationships and our attempts at love and friendships. Paralysis comes in all forms and the most debilitating are the ones that lock up our spirits and limit our hope for change.

Today's gospel encourages us to put ourselves in the man's place and look expectantly towards Jesus for the freedom to get up and move on with our lives. We don't have to feel unique or alone either, just look around at others celebrating Eucharist with us today who are also turning in trust to the One who speaks a healing and forgiving word.

What's happening for us in our assembly today as we hear this gospel and prepare to receive the Eucharist? Like the paralyzed man, we are rising from our own mats: our mats of insecurity and fear and we are given the strength to move forward. We are leaving the mats of our past sins behind, set free from what has caused us to make harmful choices. Like the man we are given a new life and a new perspective.

QUOTABLE

May I live in the world as one who always seeks to serve.

May I live as one who knows the love of God.

Lord, teach me how to live and how to serve.

With my ears may I hear, With my eyes may I see.

With my lips may I speak. May your Word be heard through me.

Thus as I live each day may love sustain the will to serve. Amen

-----lyrics from a hymn by Lloyd Pfautsch

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 Gospel:

They came to Jesus bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men.

Reflection:

Aren't we grateful that during difficult times we had good friends like those who carried the paralyzed man to Jesus? When life was too much for us and our faith felt paralyzed, they gave us support and their faith was a pillar of strength for us until we regained our own footings in faith.

So, we ask ourselves:

- What faithful friend can I name and give thanks for this week?
- And who is the person in dire straits who needs someone to lean on and some words of encouragement?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"Many gathered together so that there was no longer room for them, not even around the door." (Mark 2:1)

Every Wednesday and Friday afternoon, in our own parish office, there is, as in today's Gospel, *no room around the door*. On those days Raleigh's poorest receive a compassionate welcome, comfort in their distress and often some small financial assistance made possible by Sacred Heart's "Door Fund". The parish staff must walk around chairs and outstretched feet to make their way down the hallway, but they always speak a word of welcome to these brothers and sisters of ours who, we believe are "Christ in His distressing disguise as the poor." (*Mother Teresa*) Sacred Heart's staff lives out the words of the US Catholic Bishops when they said, *"Our parish communities are measured by how they serve the hungry, the homeless, the sick, those in prison, the stranger."*

More and more Sacred Heart parishioners know about and support the "Door Fund" with contributions in the form of donations in the envelopes kept in the back of church, or checks made out to Sacred Heart with the notation, "Door Fund". Each penny goes directly to help those who are in need.

Stories from the "Open Door":

- *"Michael" was recently released from prison. He had no family, no place to stay and no way to present himself to prospective employers. Money from the door fund helped Michael find a bedroom in a rooming house. This safe refuge enabled Michael to begin searching for a job with encouragement, resources and employment contacts provided by Sacred Heart's staff.*
- *"Sarah" is a grandmother who has custody of her two young grandchildren. She is disabled and receives a check each month for \$635.00 as well as food stamps. Her rent is \$650.00 and after waiting several years she is now 1,500th on the local list for subsidized housing. Money from the door fund helped keep Sarah's water flowing for her family.*
- *"Evelyn" is a single mother. She has worked for several years for a local grocery chain. The store has cut her hours but expects Evelyn to remain "on call" so she is unable to get a second job. Unlike her hours, "Evelyn's" rent has not decreased, and she received an eviction notice. Money from the door fund and contacts for additional resources helped Evelyn stay in her apartment.*

Thank you for your continued support of the Door Fund. It is our parish's sole resource to help the poor who come to us in need. These brothers and sisters often leave Sacred Heart exclaiming, as in today's Gospel, "*We have never seen anything like this.*"

(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:

- Rayford L. Burkes #0057308 (On death row since 4/1/93)
- John Burr #0058316 (4/21/93)
- Eugene Decastro #0104984 (4/28/93)

---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.

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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