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A reflection on the Readings for 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

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{First Reading – **Isaiah 35:4-7; Psalm 145 (146): 7-10**; Second Reading – **James 2:1-5**; Gospel – **Mark 7:31-37**}

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A Word in Season

09 September 2018

23RD Sunday
Ordinary Time

*"A Word in Season" is an initiative of
The Commission for the Intellectual Life
of the Dominican Province of India*

- September 2018 -

*Expecting Your Overwhelming
Support
And Active
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God Dwells among Us; Let's Go and Meet Him

These recent times have witnessed numerous man-made and natural disasters; the exposure of scandals within the church at international and national level, the enormous loss of life and property due to the devastating floods, and more recently, the unfair criminal charges against notable human rights activists within the country. Amidst these unpleasant events, the readings of today's liturgy invite us to

be a people of hope, as well as a community guided by charity towards all, and finally to be a people open to the Voice of God and its proclamation.

To be hopeful: “... have courage, do not fear. See, your God comes, demanding justice. He is the God who rewards, the God who comes to save you.” (Isa 35:4)

Behind this text, lie dark and troubling realities! The listeners of this prophecy find themselves languishing in misery and disparity. Having returned from the Babylonian exile, the Israelites had a huge task of rebuilding their lives. Much like the people who had survived various ravages and trauma of war, violence, financial crisis, natural calamities or death of a dear one, who have questions spinning their minds, they asked themselves where can we go next? What will happen of me and my family? How will I take care of my needs? Where will I get all the money for my sustenance? Yes, these are questions which challenge the course of one's existence.

It is amidst such uncertainties, that prophet Isaiah proclaims the good news of God's care for his people. The people who experience their lives in exile, those

who pass through the wilderness, and those who are weak or disabled, may now shout for joy, for God will transform all things. Furthermore, it is even possible that the proclamation of such good news may have the power to transform ordinary lives and the realities of the world. We are aware of the fact that suffering and pain are persistent realities of life. This fact helps explain the longing need for hope; a hope for the end of sighing and sorrow. As a sure answer, Isaiah points at God, as the source of hope for a new beginning. In this regard Pope Benedict XVI states in *Spe Salvi*, 27:

It is true that anyone who does not know God, even though he may entertain all kinds of hopes, is ultimately without hope, without the great hope that sustains the whole of life. Man's great, true hope which holds firm in spite of all disappointments can only be God—God who has loved us and who continues to love us “to the end,” until all “is accomplished.”

To be considerate to all, irrespective of their social status: “... if you truly believe in our glorified Lord, Jesus Christ, you will not discriminate between persons.” (Jas 2:1)

After having invited its readers to be the doers of the word and not mere hearers, (Jas 1:22), the letter of St. James focuses on the practical aspects of our religious faith, exhorting us to treat people with equal respect and dignity. Our faith in Jesus compels us to imitate his actions. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, religion involves two kinds of acts. Some are directed immediately to God, such as sacrifice, adoration, etc. Others are directed to honoring God by means of the virtues he commands i.e. “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mk 12:31). The letter calls forth believers to avoid partiality and treat every person charitably irrespective of one’s status since God has impartially welcomed all to his Kingdom and has made a generous offer of his Salvation irrespective of their backgrounds.

As members of the Body of Christ, have we failed to be sensitive to the needs of the poor? Have we been negligent in defending the dignity of the underprivileged? Have we been too favorable towards the wealthy or the rich? Have our religious structures fostered principles of equity and justice?

In a dominant culture, which stresses more on individualism and gives

preference to the rich and wealthy, it becomes increasingly necessary for us as Christians to pave the way for a deeper sense of fraternity and community. Here we accept a person not so much because of what he has, but we accept him simply because of what he is. In a culturally advanced society, what counts is love and generosity toward each other, rather than feelings that merely look for status and/or create division and inequality.

To be affirmed of God’s powerful intervention, through the Word made flesh, in the Person of Christ: “... he has done all things well; he makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak.” (Mk 2:37).

The gospel passage narrates in a dramatic way the episode of Jesus healing a man who was deaf and mute, and stands as a testimony to the fulfillment of prophet Isaiah’s prophecy in the first reading (Isa 35:5-6). We often see people longing for healing and satisfaction, flocking towards shrines and prayer centers. What many among these long for is a personal God experience or His miraculous touch.

I was once asked by a non-Christian devotee at the Lourd *Matha* shrine at

Nagpur, to pray for an illness that had been bothering that person for quite a long period of time. I joined my hands, closed my eyes and made a silent prayer for the person; in a few seconds the person interrupted, “*aise nahi fatherji, sirr par hath rakhkar jor se prarthana kiiyea*” (not this way father, place your hands on my head, and pray aloud). I consented immediately to the person’s prayerful request!

I do not know what happened of the person’s illness, but I did notice on the person’s face, a sense of relief and a smile, which conveyed the person’s gratefulness for this small gesture from my part.



Mark narrates to us the compassionate attention Jesus gives to this person

having an impaired speech and deafness; Jesus leads him away from the crowd, puts his fingers into his ears and touches his tongue with his spittle. The personal touch of Jesus becomes a means of healing to the person. This intimate encounter with Jesus becomes a life changing experience for the once deaf person. We can still be open to witness or experience such wonders, if God wills.

However apart from its significance of a physical healing, the gospel passage also applies to people who are spiritually deaf and mute. But what does it mean to be spiritually deaf? It means to be insensitive to the voice of the Spirit; to be deaf to the voice of God speaking to us.

While the deaf person is helpless in receiving the message communicated, due to the defect in his hearing, there could be a selective deafness even among people with a good sense of hearing. A person may choose to remain deaf to the message no matter how many times it is repeated, such as a weary wife pleading in vain to her drunkard husband to refrain from alcohol consumption. The Gospel passage is applicable to such selective deafness

especially in the spiritual realm. It reminds us that we need healing from out spiritual deafness and muteness.

We find ourselves to be part of a culture which outwardly expresses itself to be soaring high with religiosity. Yet the rampant occurrences of crimes and injustice prove that our religious practices are merely sentimental and cultic, devoid of any inward spirituality resulting in an increasingly godless and a noisy culture, where selfishness, ego and hatred make us deaf to the Word of God. "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Mat 15:8).

In such a context, Jesus, the Word made flesh, draws us close to him. He plugs his fingers into our ears. St. Gregory the Great tells us that, "The Spirit is called the Finger of God. When the Lord puts his fingers into the ears of the deaf-mute, he was opening the soul of man to faith through the gifts of the Holy Spirit." The Sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, is one such event where Jesus leads us out from the worldly crowd, towards the community of faith. He touches our ears with his Words and through the Holy Communion leads us to an intimate relationship with him.

Physical contact is an expression of Jesus' compassion.

Love seeks intimacy, and the touch of Jesus is a tangible prelude of the fellowship that believers experience with him through faith. Having received the Lords healing, we are told that the man could hear and speak well. So too, having been touched by the Word of life, we are called to proclaim to the world at large the Word that brings faith; a faith that fills people with hope and proclaims, "He has done all things well."

Therefore Mark invites every believer to look at Jesus with the eyes of faith, embrace him in hope, and imitate his heroic love and say to all with confidence, "**He can do** all things well!"

Readings at Mass

23rd Sunday Ordinary Time

First reading: Isaiah 35:4-7

Say to all faint hearts, 'Courage! Do not be afraid. Look, your God is coming, vengeance is coming, the retribution of God; he is coming to save you.' Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed, then the lame shall leap like a deer and the tongues of the dumb sing for joy; for water gushes in the desert, streams in the

wasteland, the scorched earth becomes a lake, the parched land springs of water.

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 145(146):7-10

R. (1b) Praise the Lord, my soul!

The God of Jacob keeps faith forever,
secures justice for the oppressed,
gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets captives free.

R. Praise the Lord, my soul!

The LORD gives sight to the blind;
the LORD raises up those who were bowed down.

The LORD loves the just;
the LORD protects strangers.

R. Praise the Lord, my soul!

The fatherless and the widow the LORD sustains,

but the way of the wicked he thwarts.

The LORD shall reign forever;
your God, O Zion, through all generations.

Alleluia.

R. Praise the Lord, my soul!

Second reading: James 2:1-5

My brothers, do not try to combine faith in Jesus Christ, our glorified Lord, with the making of distinctions between classes of people. Now suppose a man comes into your synagogue, beautifully dressed and with a gold ring on, and at the same time a poor man comes in, in shabby clothes, and you

take notice of the well-dressed man, and say, 'Come this way to the best seats'; then you tell the poor man, 'Stand over there' or 'You can sit on the floor by my foot-rest.' Can't you see that you have used two different standards in your mind, and turned yourselves into judges, and corrupt judges at that?

Listen, my dear brothers: it was those who are poor according to the world that God chose, to be rich in faith and to be the heirs to the kingdom which he promised to those who love him.

Gospel: Mark 7:31-37

Returning from the district of Tyre, Jesus went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, right through the Decapolis region. And they brought him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they asked him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, put his fingers into the man's ears and touched his tongue with spittle. Then looking up to heaven he sighed; and he said to him, '*Ephphatha*', that is, 'Be opened.' And his ears were opened, and the ligament of his tongue was loosened and he spoke clearly. And Jesus ordered them to tell no one about it, but the more he insisted, the more widely they published it. Their admiration was unbounded. 'He has done all things well,' they said 'he makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak.'

In the person of Jesus, the mystery of God the Father's love for the entire human family is revealed. He did not want us to remain in a false autonomy. Rather he reconciled us to himself in a renewed pact of love.

We must form welcoming communities in which all outcasts find a home, concrete experiences of communion which attract the disenchanted glance of contemporary humanity with the ardent force of love — “See how they love one another!” (Tertullian, *Apology*, 39, 7). The beauty of faith must particularly shine in the actions of the sacred Liturgy, above all in the Sunday Eucharist. It is precisely in liturgical celebrations that the Church reveals herself as God's work and makes the meaning of the Gospel visible in word and gesture.

It is up to us today to render experiences of the Church concretely accessible, to multiply the wells where thirsting men and women are invited to encounter Jesus, to offer oases in the deserts of life. Christian communities and, in them, every disciple of the Lord are responsible for this: an irreplaceable testimony has been entrusted to each one, so that the Gospel can enter the lives of all. This requires of us holiness of life (*ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS*; 7-28 OCTOBER 2012, no. 3).
