

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)  
(Isaiah 50:5-9 / Mark 8:27-35)  
13.09.2015

In today's first reading (the First Servant Song) Isaiah encouraged his listeners to persevere because God was close at hand. The prophet reassured the Israelites that the Lord was close to them (*at hand*) as their helper, their defender against their enemies.

Isaiah's words of comfort encourage us to trust in the Lord when we feel in any way menaced, threatened or intimidated.

There are times when we can feel oppressed, just as the Israelites did at the time of Isaiah's prophecy.

We can feel oppressed and even totally crushed by the sometimes harsh realities of life.

The word of God heard this morning wants us to grasp that the Lord is close to us in and through every event of our lives, even (and especially) the most terrible  
St Augustine goes as far as to say that *the Lord is closer to us than we are to ourselves*.

The prophet Isaiah's message is brought one step further by the even greater assurance given to us through today's gospel passage.

Herein we are shown that God has drawn close to us in the incarnate person of His Son, Christ-Jesus.

God has drawn so close to us as to have become one of us, one with us, in every way. The Lord is one with us right now, for Christ lives in our hearts and, by the grace of our baptism, we live our lives in Him.

It is as if we are enfolded in Christ, held near to Him, nestled in His protective care, comforted by His loving embrace. In His love we find peace and security.

God has become totally one with us so that we may be totally one with Him.

What I have said there implies that there is nothing in our human experience that God has not espoused in *the Christ* He sent into the world.

The epistle to the Hebrews says that Christ became *one with us in every way, except sin*.

That does not mean that Christ remains a stranger to our sinful nature, however, for, we are told in Second Corinthians that He went as far as *to become sin for our sakes*.

Elsewhere, in the First Epistle of Peter, we read how *Christ took upon Himself the sins of us all*. Peter's insight, shared in the Letter he wrote to the early Church, is that we see Isaiah's prophecy of the Suffering Servant given flesh and fulfilled in the person of Christ.

All this reassures us that Christ is with us in our most excruciating pain, our deepest sorrow and our greatest loss.

He is with us, even at those times when we feel ourselves to be totally alienated from Him for whatever reason, including those life choices we make which are a rejection of Him.

The Lord is close at hand. He is always ready to intervene in our favour, even if and when we are holding Him at bay.

In today's gospel we heard Peter confess Jesus to be *the Christ*.

The apostle's strong conviction was evidenced at this moment, often referred to as *Peter's*

*Confession of faith.*

By the words he spoke Peter displayed that he had grasped much about Jesus, but what ensues in this text immediately after the apostle's profession of faith shows us that he had not yet grasped it all.

At Caesarea Philippi Peter had not yet reached the end of his faith journey.

He was only a little advanced along the way.

Caesarea Philippi was one of Peter's *moments*, a high point along the road, but there was still a way to travel.

Fair enough, in reply to Jesus' question about the thoughts circulating among the people about His identity, and Jesus' question about the disciples own assessment of Him, Peter responded with audacious faith and strong conviction: *You are the Christ.*

So far so good.

Peter recognised Jesus to be the Messiah: God's Anointed One sent into the world.

The apostle's insight at this point in the story is all the more commendable given the fact that already Jesus had shown Himself to be *the Christ* in quite unconventional ways.

Peter had evidently managed to cope with a certain degree of surprise and unexpectedness in Jesus' way of being, but what we hear this morning shows us that Peter still had limits beyond which he was not willing to pass. Unconventional behaviour was one thing (it was still acceptable), but suffering and death were another (these were unacceptable to Peter.)

In the short passage from Mark 8 we read today, it was clearly a step too far for Peter to go to admit to what Jesus said when He spoke of the inevitability of suffering and His approaching death.

Peter just could not accept that the Messiah would find Himself treated unjustly and suffer innocently at the hands of men who would bring about His premature death.

Peter's reflex was to insist that the Messiah could not show himself to be weak in this way.

At this point we hear Jesus pronounce that very strong admonition he addressed to Peter: *Get behind me Satan! The way you think is man's way. It is not God's way.*

If Jesus had not dismissed Peter's line of argument here He would have been distracted from and failed in the mission the Father had confided to Him.

Jesus' mission was, and it remains, to draw close to wounded humanity and, in that drawing close to our wounded humanity, to bring about its redemption.

Jesus' mission was, and it remains, to bring fallen humanity God's healing, life-restoring grace.

Jesus had to reach humanity where it most need God's help: in suffering and pain, in the experience of injustice and loss, in the stark realities of sin and death.

Let us ask ourselves the question: In our own lives, when and where do we most need the Messiah?

Do we not need Christ's presence most when we are held in the grip of excruciating suffering and relentless pain?

Do we not need Christ's presence most when we are struggling to break free from the grip sin and death have over our lives?

Jesus' prediction that He would suffer, face up to and traverse death, so as to enter into fullness of life, obliged Peter to undergo a total *about-turn* in his understanding of Messiahship.

Like every other child of Israel, the apostle Peter had surely longed for and expected the manifestation of a Triumphant Messiah. He will have waited for a display of majesty and glory by *the Christ*.

In the person of Jesus, *the Christ* was made manifest in a very different and unexpected way. The Messiah appeared in a way that scandalised Peter. *God's Anointed One* was to be revealed through a display of weakness and powerlessness in full view of all. The Messiah was to be made manifest in the humiliation of suffering and the horror of death upon a cross.

What a scandal! And yet how necessary this scandal was!

The fact that Jesus died in company upon Calvary's Hill, flanked by two unfortunate creatures, broken and wounded men (just like us, who are all broken and wounded people), encourages us to believe that Christ is there for us and with us when we need His presence most. He is there when things are at their worst for us.

Paul's words to the Corinthians reassure us that *Christ is with us when we suffer*.

Not only is Christ with us when we suffer, He is within us at those times. He is living His passion in our hearts. He suffers within us and He leads us, through our pain and distress, into life and peace... in other words, into the experience of His resurrection.

Christ has won the victory for us by His triumph over death upon the cross. He has imparted to us nothing less than a share in His own risen life.

I dare to say this morning that God saw humanity's need for a suffering Messiah.

While Peter was still blind to this need, God was not.

The Lord saw our need for One who would identify with us in our pain, thus making it possible for us to identify with Him, when we are caught up in and victims of sorrow and distress, injustice and hardship, of whatever kind.

We need a Messiah with whom we can identify because He has identified with us.

When we think of the life experiences of Jesus, and can see how they relate to our own, we draw great comfort from this.

We need a Messiah who dared to show Himself to us weak and powerless.

When we are dry we need a Messiah who on the cross showed Himself to be thirsty.

When we feel humiliated and shamed, vulnerable and exposed, we need a Messiah who hung upon the cross, stripped naked, displayed in the sight of all to be a failure.

Brennan Manning writes: *Am I unjustly criticised, rejected, betrayed by a friend? I can touch the life of Jesus who faced the same things, and I can will to respond as He did.*

I am sure that the Peter who later on in his own life was to suffer the same fate as Jesus, drew

comfort and strength in his hour of his martyrdom from the memory he held in his heart of a Messiah who underwent the passion to show His solidarity with us.

Jesus' prediction of His passion and death upon the cross really challenged Peter's image of God and the Messiah God chose to send to His people.

It shattered Peter's image of God as an all-powerful despot. This image of the deity as an all-powerful despot was a false image of God from which Peter had to be set free.

I dare to ask: is this false image of God one we may still be tempted to carry in our hearts? If so, it is one from which we need to be set free!

Jesus' prediction of His passion and death invited Peter, and it invites us, to enter into an understanding of God who is close to us.

Our God is not One so far removed from our human condition as to be indifferent to our pain.

*The Lord is close at hand. He is with us when we suffer.*

Christ is not only near to us, but alive and at work within us, as we grapple with the problems of life, including the very real questions suffering and death throw up to us.

It is more comforting to think of a Messiah who has shed tears, as Jesus did, than of one who reigns so far above and removed from us that He has felt nothing of what we ourselves feel.

Let me share with you a few lines from the writings of the late Cardinal Martini which can perhaps help us appreciate in some little way what the great mystery of the cross has to say to us today.

Martini wrote:

*There are crosses without a name, and often, without a hope.*

*There are crosses of doom which, at best, are merely tolerated. Those who bear them lead lives of quiet desperation and silent resignation.*

*From His cross, Jesus invites each of us today to put all these crosses, and not just our own, into relationship with our own.*

*Jesus invites us to do as He did; to plant seeds of love and hope in the soil of each of the crosses we encounter.*

Christ's message in the words we hear Him speak to Peter this morning is new. It is Good News! The Gospel is that the cross, the sign of ignominy and shame, has been opened up as the way that leads to life.

What Peter did not hear Jesus say, because of his initial reaction, which was one of fear of and repugnance to all mention of suffering and death, was that the way Christ would trace before us would lead, beyond the harsh realities of the human condition, to life with God forever in the resurrection.

Jesus had said, but Peter failed to hear it, the passion and death, to which the Son of Man would be subjected, was the passage necessary to lead Him to rise again on the third day.

What we celebrate every Sunday is that *third day*.

The *first day* of the new creation!

We have spoken much of the cross, let us not lose sight of what the cross points to: the Resurrection!

I return to the late Cardinal Martini's writings for the final word of this morning's reflection:  
*The Resurrection reveals the mysterious and overflowing vitality that is born of the cross. (...)*  
*The Christian disciple receives the task from the Lord to transform man's cross into the cross of Christ. Man's cross is ambiguous and without hope. Christ's cross is bright and luminous. It bears the name of love. In hope, it prepares for the victory of life and the Resurrection.*

Amen!