

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME — B

READING I Is 35:4-7a

READING II Jas 2:1-5

GOSPEL Mk 7:31-37

It is commonly accepted that Is 35 is from the prophet of the exile, Second Isaiah. To the discouraged and fearful exiles, he addresses a message of hope. The Lord God has not forgotten them; In fact, he will lead them home. The journey home will be a second Exodus. The miracles of this second Exodus, abundance of water in the desert, will outstrip the miracles of the first Exodus. The author then singles out four categories of people who will particularly benefit from God's saving action: The blind, the deaf, the lame, and the dumb. These categories underline the pitiable condition of God's people (see Is 43:8). Even if these categories refer to all people rather than the physically handicapped, the symbol still implies the destitution of those so afflicted.

The author of James begins by establishing a principle against partiality: The great glory of the Lord should immediately rule out such attitudes. Next, he proposes the example of two men, one rich and one poor, in an assembly where they are unknown. If one makes concessions because of the rich man's status, one has discriminated. Finally, the author adds a reason against such partiality: God has chosen the poor and made them heirs of his kingdom. These are the ones who love him.

This episode in Mark's Gospel depicts his attitude towards the Gentiles. The geographical note, "through the Gentile region of the Decapolis", serves to indicate his intent. The Gentiles, who at one time were deaf and dumb towards God, are now able to hear God and to give God the proper respect. What God promised to Israel (see Is 35:5-6) now holds true for the Gentiles.

The story of the cure of the deaf man with the speech impediment is different than Mark's usual miracle stories. Yet Jesus' actions were common among Greek and Jewish healers of the time. His actions were sacramental gestures, symbolizing the opening of the ears and the loosening of the tongue. By use of the unique word for speech impediment (v 32), Mark is clearly citing Is 35:6. Hence the messianic age has arrived in Jesus (see Mt 11:5; Lk 7:22). Two other features are noteworthy: Jesus' groaning, indicating great compassion for the sufferer, and the unusual reaction of the people; An amazement that was unbounded.

Be discriminating — prefer the underprivileged. We naturally opt for the beautiful people.

It is difficult to seek out the less than beautiful. We tend to prefer the company of the elegant and the powerful. It is hard to identify with the disenfranchised. We like to associate with those who can reimburse us. It is almost demeaning to be aligned with those who have no means of reimbursement. Yet, be discriminating — prefer the underprivileged.

In James, the danger is discrimination: A discrimination in favor of the privileged. Thus, the Christian can become both judge and jury and automatically decide in favor of the rich person. Yet God's discrimination is in favor of the underprivileged. In James, God deliberately chooses the poor to make them rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom. While James does not exclude the rich from the kingdom, he implies that his people are less prone to find Christ in the poor than in the rich. In James, therefore, the principle is: Be discriminating — prefer the underprivileged.

Mark shows Jesus as the friend of the underprivileged: The sick, the village lunatics, the tax collectors, and the ignorant rabble who lacked precision in their knowledge of the Law ("the sinners"). Though the cure of the deaf man with the speech impediment is clearly symbolic in Mark, it is also another instance of concern for the underprivileged. Though Jesus dined at some of the most exclusive eating places, he identified more easily with the underprivileged. In Mark, therefore, the principle is: Be discriminating — prefer the underprivileged.

Those who work to rehabilitate alcoholics and drug addicts show discriminating taste. Missionaries who give up comfort to labor in the Third and Fourth Worlds reveal a sense of discrimination. Those who generously make efforts to obtain justice for minorities indicate discriminating ability. Families who take into their homes and hearts the unwanted and the unloved demonstrate discriminating tendencies. All such people seek to find their God according to Christian standards. The way of life is: Be discriminating — prefer the underprivileged.

Eucharist gathers both the beautiful and the less than beautiful people. Eucharist endeavors to reflect the mind-set of the discriminating Jesus by stressing that his self-giving was "for all." Eucharist, therefore, challenges the community to carry over this sense of discrimination into daily life. Eucharist suggests that those who provide for the underprivileged share Jesus' sense of discrimination. In Eucharist, the principle also is: Be discriminating — prefer the underprivileged.