

the Sunday Readings



23rd Sunday Ordinary Time
the Season of Creation: Week 2
Social Justice Week

23rd Sunday Ordinary Time

the Season of Creation continues ¹

introduction

In today's gospel, Mark describes Jesus' healing of a man with disabilities. The deaf-mute is rendered poor and vulnerable by his disability. Discipleship is the focus of the evangelist's account. *'The little ones'*, that is, *'the common people'*, because of their greater needs, understand something crucial about God's creation.² It's an understanding that regular disciples might not grasp. The power for life-giving in God's creation is, **for all**. It includes the vulnerable, the disabled, the excluded – all who have no choice but to admit their own frailty and powerlessness.

Today also marks the beginning of *Social Justice Week*, which challenges us, as disciples of Jesus, to open our minds eyes to the injustice of unsustainable ways of living, which impact especially on the poor. The guiding theme of the Season of Creation; *'to hope and Act with Creation'*, is at one with the objective of Social Justice Week.

A disciples' own eyes and ears must be opened too. They are vulnerable too!³ It is part of the universal conversion Jesus seeks from all his would-be followers. The account of Jesus' healing a deaf-mute serves to introduce the caring theme – our task to contribute to healing all God's creation as we continue the Season of Creation.

first reading: Isaiah 35: 4–7 ⁴

[the return of the redeemed to Zion]

*Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you."(4)
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;(5)
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;(6)
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.(7)*

1 Cover image: 'Koru' – the spiral shape of a new unfurling silver fern frond, symbolizing new life, growth, strength and peace.

2 Jesus came to change things. His disciples drew too easy conclusions – *'We are not going to have any more deaf or dumb'*. *'We're all going to be healthy now!'* So later, when they saw Jesus die, they lost heart. Then they experienced his resurrection and they began to realise that through a disciple's openness to the reigning of God, Jesus continues to perform *'miracles'*. It's a lesson in how we are to hear this account of Jesus' practise.

3 A reality that has become all too clear in the current era of human-induced climate change.

4 *Is.35:1-10* is similar to the description of the return from the exile, found in *Is.40-55*.

The prophet urges his people to be, 'strong and feat not' because the Lord God is faithful. The promise of a new community and a new faithfulness is put in poetic, concrete and imaginative language. This vision of a new future, exposes *the powers-of-death* in the way things are managed in the present age.⁵ Isaiah carries on a relentless exposure of the self-deception of the royal and religious houses.⁶ The dominant groups in Isaiah's time have no self-critical capacity. They used religion to legitimate their crassest vested-interests. For Isaiah the restoration of covenant depended on proper social practises. Isaiah had earlier asserted the Lord's norms for viable communal life:

*And I will make fair judgement the measure,
and uprightness the plumb-line.
But hail will sweep away the refuge of lies
and floods wash away the hiding-place.⁷
People who act uprightly and speak honestly,
who scorn to get rich by extortion,
who reject bribes out of hand,
who refuse to listen to plans involving bloodshed
and shut their eyes rather than countenance crime,
such people will live on the heights; . . .
they will be fed, they will not want for water.⁸*

Isaiah asserts the alternative way of acting. It is conduct that opposes the managers of royal 'truth' and their self-serving. A truly developed person, according to the prophet, is one who does not engage in collusion to disrupt the community and exploit the helpless. Isaiah speaks the Lord's '*Word of hope*' to victims of the system and promises a new community and a new faith. This glimmer of a new future, serves to expose *the power-of-death* in the way things are managed in the present. The promises are linked to the Lord's 'power for life-giving' or 'grace'. This is a way to speak against the death-promoting ways of those in charge. The Israelites have failed to be what they have been called to be. They have permitted social division to grow. The power of a false faith has reduced, deceived and prevented them from making a truthful discernment of what is real, good and right. The prophet sees the work of the Lord in the eyes that are opened, the ears that hear again and the lame and the mute being healed (vv.5-6) and the Earth being restored to fruitfulness and life (vv.6-7).

response: **Psalm 146 : 5c – 10**

[the greatness and goodness of God]

*Happy are those whose hope
is in the Lord their God,(5c)
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;(6)*

5 Our own efforts to hand on and keep alive the prophetic tradition of faithfulness to covenant, should not lose sight of the prophet's subversive vision.

6 In the ancient world, the royal and religious houses, would be a rough equivalent to the political-commercial establishment in our own society.

7 *Is.28:17*

8 *Is.33:15-16*

*who executes justice for the oppressed;
 who gives food to the hungry.(7)
 The Lord sets the prisoners free;
 the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.(8)
 The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
 the Lord loves the righteous.(9)
 The Lord watches over the strangers;
 he upholds the orphan and the widow,
 but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.(9)
 The Lord will reign forever, your GOD, O Zion,
 for all generations. Praise the Lord!(10)*

The psalmist addresses praise to the Lord in the memory of the God's past actions of justice and faithfulness. This memory grounds the people's reliance on God's intervention in the present. Praise is addressed to the Lord, rather than to any human agents. The Lord alone can save. The speaker's praise, moves to the goal of justice (v.6c). Behind these claims is the memory of the Lord's power and right-ordering of reality. 'Keeps faith forever' re-affirms the Lord's practise of fidelity in the maintenance of creation (v.6a).

According to the psalmist, the Lord acts generously, justly, liberatively – in sustaining the vulnerable; enlightening; loving; and inhibiting the wicked (vv.7-9). These characteristics express the Lord's free, passionate and limitless Self-giving to the covenant partner (the Israelites). These characteristics are dimensions of the personal, relational, covenanted life. Such life is, 'good', because the Lord is faithful to covenant. From this inexplicable but unwavering faithfulness, life in the Israelite tradition is trustworthy and coherent.⁹

second reading: James 2: 1 – 5

[warning against partiality]

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?(1) For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in,(2) and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet,"(3) have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?(4) Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?(5)

James urges followers of Christ to treat all people without discrimination. If they must discriminate, let them favour the side of the lowly, rather than side with the high or mighty. What makes a Christian disciple is this insistence on a faith which cannot be compatible with certain behaviours and attitudes. James gives examples. Faith and favouritism are incompatible,¹⁰ as also are faith and

⁹ The Israelite's memory of the reversal of hopeless situations for sojourners, widows and orphans, runs through this statement of the Lord's generosity, along with the theme of those who do and do not adhere to the Lord's covenant (vv.8-9). This appeal to the Holy One's creative power for life-giving, goes to the core of Israelite faith.

¹⁰ Cf. *Jm.2:1-13*

indifference.¹¹ Discrimination or favouritism is the starting point. James condemns treating the poor in a routine or even hostile way, while treating the rich with respect and favours (v.3). That's making distinctions between people on the basis of external appearances alone. Anyone who honours the rich at the expense of the poor, discriminates against those whom God has elected (v.5). It's a blasphemy against God, whose possession the poor are.¹²

God's judgement seems to be discriminating in favour of those who are without resources. According to the author, God has chosen the poor to be, 'rich in faith' and, 'heirs of the reigning of God'.¹³ Secondly, any partiality shown towards the rich contradicts common sense because, "the rich . . . , oppress you" and "drag you into court". In other words, currying favour with the rich and powerful doesn't produce the anticipated results because they act only to protect themselves. Christian disciples need to protect themselves by remembering who their true benefactor is.

gospel reading: Mark 7: 31–37

[Jesus cures a deaf-mute]

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.(31) They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him.(32) He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.(33)

Jesus left Tyre and passed through Sidon and the Decapolis region, before returning to the Lake of Galilee.¹⁴ Jesus may still have been among a predominantly pagan audience when a deaf-mute, who may have been a pagan also, is brought to him for healing (v.33).¹⁵ In spite of trying to keep his practise low-key, Jesus continues to create a sort of 'magnetic field' – by which outsiders, foreigners, women, pagans, the common people and the sick, seem to be irresistibly drawn to him. It seems that's enough only to be in touch with Jesus' energy to receive a kind of discharge of power.

Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened."(34) And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.(35) Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. (36) They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done

11 *Ibid.* vv.4-26

12 Such attitudes and conduct transgresses the whole Torah of Moses (the Law of Lord God) – it's in the same category as murder and adultery.

13 [v.5] 'Has not God chosen the poor in the world . . . ?' echoes Luke's form of the Beatitudes [cf. Lk.6:20ff] as well as Paul's statement [1 Co.1:26]). The claim that God discriminates in favour of the poor and demands corresponding human behaviour, has roots deep in Israelite tradition (cf. Lv.19:15, Dt.1:16-17 & 16:18-20).

14 Possibly persecution had forced Jesus from his home territory into a kind of exile in pagan territory. Part of the lake region was occupied by ten pagan tribes (decapolis).

15 In the mentality of the time that Mark wrote his gospel, disabilities like deafness and muteness are among afflictions that were viewed as punishments. Those suffering disability were regarded as sinners, or perhaps, children of sinners. By opening the ears and releasing the tongue of the man brought to him, Jesus restores the man back to health and integrates him into society, giving him back his religious rights. The man ceases to be a marginal figure.

everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”(37)

Jesus touches the man's ears with his finger and spits on his hand and touches the man's tongue (v.33). Jesus' handiwork transforms the deaf-mute person to hearing and speaking. This healing work is the practise of love on the economic level. To heal is work and thus, is prohibited on the Sabbath,¹⁶ but Jesus says to the deaf-mute, "*Ephphatha*" (v.34b).¹⁷ In the Book of Revelation, the writer says, that new heavens and a new Earth will be created and the new society (the new Jerusalem) will, 'come down from heaven'.¹⁸ It is at this 'heaven' where the Lord's power is active, that Jesus looked. According to Mark, 'he sighed' (v.34a). It was the sigh of someone who feels deeply the needs of the people around him.¹⁹

Faced with the chosen people who have become deaf to his preaching, Jesus has gone over to pagan territory. He comes to open eyes that are blind and to unstop ears that were deaf. He challenges the minds and the self-sufficiency of the rich, the powerful and the proud. Each time this gospel is proclaimed, Jesus takes issue with our own complacency and self-centeredness. To all of us, he commands: '*Be opened*'.

At this stage in Mark's account, the liberating Word is sown in Galilee and beyond. Only those who leave or are outside the powerful groups, broadcast his practise. The poor, because of their physical or social disability, are aware of their need for God's creative power in their lives and they welcome his healing. Discipleship is the focus in the evangelist's account.²⁰

for sharing:²¹

- *The return of the Redeemed to Zion. Comment on [Isaiah 35 : 4 – 7](#)*
- *A warning against partiality. Comment on [James 2 : 1 – 5](#)*
- *Jesus cures a deaf man. Comment on [Mark 7 : 31 – 37](#)*

¹⁶ Mk.3:2

¹⁷ Jesus called for his disciples to open up, not just their ears, but to sense the reality they aren't sensing at present. He came to do that for everyone. Our senses are opened up when we become aware of the injustices which we haven't seen before; then our practise must speak louder than mere words.

¹⁸ Cf. Rv.21:2

¹⁹ *Mark* translates the Aramaic word for 'open', into the Greek, 'Ephphatha' emphasising that it isn't merely the ears of his reader that would be opened. We should open ourselves to others, as we hear and then can speak about Jesus' work of love.

²⁰ The 'miracle' of opening ears and mouths is a way of speaking about the 'miracle of discipleship'. To be a disciple means, to be open to God's creative life-giving reigning, and only then can disciples be authentic followers of Jesus.

²¹ Lectio Divina: reading God's Word in the Season of Creation is a moment for prayer and the Word to enlighten and renew us through reflection. There are four steps which don't have to have the following order: *lectio* (reading) – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio* (reflection) – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in God's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio* (prayer) – allow your heart to speak to God, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio* (rest) – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of God, in simple and wordless contemplation.

prayer:

*Loving Creator God,
 You have been faithful through billions of years,
 patiently preparing Earth to be the nurturing home
 for all that dwell on it and in it.
 As we come to recognise the threats to it's well-being
 from the values and actions of our human community,
 we ask You to deepen our trust in Your faithful love;
 Your power to save us, and Your work
 in us, among us, and through us.
 Send the healing power of Christ
 to open our eyes, our ears and our hearts.
 Unite the human family and teach us
 to recognise and embrace Your wisdom;
 Wisdom that suffers, guides and heals
 and renews our common home.
 We make our prayer in the name of Christ, Your Word
 and in the power of the Holy Spirit,
 the Wisdom at work renewing all things in creation, now and always.
 Amen.*

the review:²²

The dominant model of development over the last few hundred years is based on a vision of unlimited economic growth fed by production, consumption, and competition for wealth on a limited planet. This continues to drive the exploitation of Earth and the diminishment of Earth's ability to renew itself and remain a nurturing home for all its inhabitants.

The goal of adopting a more sustainable lifestyle, promotes a sense of sufficiency, rather than unnecessary wealth accumulation and consumerism. How can we transform our lifestyles and values to embrace a more authentic and sustainable way of living on Earth in solidarity with all God's Creation?

*Today the apostle James reminds us that God chooses the poor of the world, to the rich. This reminder echoes throughout Christian history. Most recently raised in Pope Francis's call in *Laudato Sí*, to listen to the Cry of the Poor and the Cry of Earth. The poor are often the first to suffer and, in their suffering, to reveal the injustices and unsustainable ways of living of our societies.*

Responding to the Cry of the Poor calls us to promote eco-justice and to defend human life and all forms of life on Earth. Pope Francis has often spoken of the wisdom and faith of indigenous peoples and the poor, as rich resources for learning to live sustainably on Earth and contribute to its healing restoration.

How can we engage that wisdom and grow in that faith? Do we have relationships with people in poverty? With indigenous peoples? What wisdom do they have to share with us about caring for Creation sustainably, reverently? How

²² the review: – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the Word and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.

do their warnings and demonstrations in resistance to development projects speak to us and invite our solidarity? Do we see the growing ecological crises behind the increasing flows of climate refugees? Does their suffering stir our compassion? Do we hear Christ's command to welcome the 'stranger', who approaches in the form of a climate refugee?

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