

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year B

Twenty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading: (Isaiah 35.4-7)

The Day of the Lord

While Israel was still in being, the Day of the Lord was a threat, a day of expected punishment. Once the axe of the Babylonian exile had fallen, and disaster had come upon the whole of Israel and Judah, the Day of the Lord becomes a promise of salvation. Hence we have this lovely, joyful poem, looking forward to the coming of the Lord to heal Israel and take vengeance on her tormentors.

It looks forward to the coming of the Lord himself, not of his representative. We call it 'messianic', as if it concerned the coming of the Lord's anointed. But in the expectation of the deliverance of Israel, even up to the time of Jesus, it was not clear whether God would visit the earth personally (whatever that would mean) to effect the total reversal of all things and the healing of all misery, or whether his messenger and herald would come first.

In the late prophecies of Malachi, not long before the Incarnation, the prophet Elijah will come as the Lord's herald, to prepare the way. So was John the Baptist this Elijah figure, preparing for Jesus? Or is Jesus preparing for the Lord? Or is the coming of Jesus the coming of the Lord?

Question:

What would the coming of God's rule or Kingship mean in real terms?

Second reading: (James 2.1-5)

Shabby or Chic?

The Letter of James has been described as 'a manifesto for social justice', and among all its pieces of advice this is certainly a strong emphasis. Concern for the poor and the less fortunate runs right through the Bible. Human beings were created in the image of God, and this is one of the ways in which this image must be expressed.

So Israel is constantly told: 'You must treat the stranger among you as I treated you when you were strangers in Egypt.' Similarly, widows and orphans are the special object of God's care. In the beatitudes of Luke's gospel, the poor, the hungry and those who weep are assured of God's blessing. In more modern times the great Papal Encyclicals on social issues gave the first official teaching anywhere on the rights of exploited classes after the Industrial Revolution, the right to a just wage, to healthcare, to form trade unions, and so on.

However, it is always instinctive and natural - as this witty and poignant reading shows - to give more honour to the lord mayor at the front than to the tramp who shuffles in at the back of the Church, forgetting that in God's eyes they have just the same value.

Question:

Are Christians sufficiently aware of the social demands of the gospel?

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Gospel:

Mark 7.31-37)

Jesus cures a Deaf Man

We have been prepared to see the true meaning of this incident by the first reading, for in his wonderful cures Jesus is fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah. Jesus' activity as he goes around 'doing all things well' is the coming of God into the world, the Day of the Lord when the tongues of the dumb will sing for joy.

Jesus is the sacrament of God. In him, God is active in the world, bringing peace, healing and joy. In him, people met and experienced God. His gestures of putting his fingers into the man's ears and touching his tongue with spittle are affectionate ways of showing that God is physically at work in him.

In a modern hygiene-conscious world such gestures might be frowned upon. But if we are truly acting as the members of Christ's body in the world we cannot hold back, and from time to time will be involved physically and totally in helping others. One such courageous gesture was Princess Diana's handshake with an AIDS sufferer when it was still believed that the condition was physically contagious. We too can bring Christ's healing in countless simple, but often costly and courageous, ways.

Question:

Is there any connection between sin and sickness?
