

HOMILY SUNDAY 23 – B (Homily 02)*
“Faith Expressed through Love”
(Isaiah 35:4-7; Psalm 146; James 2:1-5; Mark 7:31-17)

A Sunday school teacher asked her children, as they were on the way to church service, “And why is it necessary to be quiet in church?” One bright little girl replied, “Because people are sleeping.”

Faith that expresses itself through love is true faith indeed.

The first reading of the Sunday liturgy often contains an element of prophecy. This Sunday is no different. We are told by the prophet Isaiah in no uncertain terms that God will come as a saviour to rescue us. He encourages the fearful and weak in faith to truly believe in the powerful presence of God in their lives. He promises that miracles of healing will be the sign of the in-breaking of God’s presence in the world. The blind, the lame, the deaf will be healed and there will even be ecological renewal.

In the gospel we see Jesus fulfilling the prophecy of the first reading. In a way that breaks open all the restrictive and protective prescriptions of the traditions of Jewish religion, Jesus touches an unclean person, a handicapped person, a man who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech. He even goes beyond touch to use radical actions such as using spittle and putting his fingers in the man’s ear.

I believe it is this experience of total attention, caring and compassion on the part of Jesus towards this poor suffering marginalized individual that healed him on the spot. No one before had ever treated him with such dignity, care, reverence, as did Jesus. And the man was healed. Surely this was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah. God had come, in the person of Jesus, and the messianic promise was being fulfilled.

Such an earth-shaking reality was too much for the people to take in, however, and Jesus knew that. They would misunderstand, and try to force him to use his healing power for their own selfish purposes that always marked their failure to follow God’s ways. They always wanted land, temple and kings, and now they were under the domination of the Roman Empire, chaffing at the bit for some kind of political deliverance.

So Jesus orders the people not to indiscriminately spread the news of the healing. This is called the messianic secret which is especially characteristic of the gospel of Mark. Jesus did not want to be known as a wonder worker or miracle worker only. He was about so much more than that. He was about establishing the very reign of God in the hearts of those who would believe in him and surrender their lives to him. How would those who were in authority ever understand that, until they had seen the full extent of the love and compassion of the kingdom displayed on the cross and realized in the resurrection. So in the meantime, he ordered the people not to say anything about the miracle.

The second reading from James, a leader of the first Christian community after Jesus

ascended into heaven, demonstrates that some of the followers of Jesus understood the import of what he was all about, that the reign of God was a manifestation of a new power, one that is counter-cultural and not easily understood by the world. Nor was this new reality easy to accept for the early followers of Jesus. They too were tempted to think that this new religion could give them status, power, importance, and a feeling of false security based on superiority over others. James nips that temptation in the bud. Real religion is not at all about class, status or making distinctions. James intuitively correctly that to believe in Jesus is to see him in the least, the marginalized, the poor. It is to be humble, compassionate and caring one's self, as was Jesus.

The psalm affirms this simple truth. God not only comes to save us, but also to bring justice to the oppressed, the poor and the marginalized. The message is clear. Our God does come to save us, not in the way of the world, but in a new and marvellous way of compassion and love for the least among us. And the way God wants to do this is through us, those who believe in Jesus. We must express our faith in the same way – the way of compassion and caring for all those in need.

Jean Vanier, son of the former governor-general of Canada and founder of L'Arche, has written a book entitled *Becoming Human*. In that book he writes eloquently how he discovered new depths of meaning and purpose in his life by living with the mentally challenged. That experience challenged his faith and helped it to grow. Here is how he puts it:

I believed in love but for me, love meant generosity, doing good for others. At that time, I did not realize that through our love we can help others to discover their own intrinsic value; we can reveal to them their beauty and their uniqueness. Gradually, through L'Arche, I began to see the value of the communion of hearts and of a love that empowers, that helps others to stand up; a love that shows itself in humility and in trust.

The L'Arche communities have actually worked miracles in the lives of some of their members. They have done so through an unconditional love and acceptance of the mentally challenged as they are. Some of them were even considered mentally insane, and they have found new life and love through the L'Arche community. The L'Arche communities shine out as a bright light of genuine faith and love in our society that has as its false gods, possessions, prestige and power.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is one way that Jesus uses to love us, to remain with us, to continue to transform us today. It is an act of faith that expresses his unconditional love for us.

May our celebration today of this Eucharist empower us to express our faith in Jesus through unconditional compassionate love of all others, especially the weakest and the wounded of our world.