

Liturgy of the Word

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B

First Reading Is 43:18-19. 21-22. 24-25 A reading from the prophet Isaiah

On account of me your iniquities are blotted out. Thus says the Lord: No need to recall the past, no need to think about what was done before. See, I am doing a new deed, even now it comes to light; can you not see it?

Yes, I am making a road in the wilderness, paths in the wilds. The people I have formed for myself will sing my praises. Jacob, you have not invoked me, you have not troubled yourself, Israel, on my behalf. Instead you have burdened me with your sins, troubled me with your iniquities.

I it is, I it is, who must blot out everything and not remember your sins.

The word of the Lord.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 40:2-5. 13-14. R. v.5

(*R.*) Lord, heal my soul, for I have sinned against you.

1. Happy the man who considers the poor and the weak. The Lord will save him in the day of evil, will guard him, give him life, make him happy in the land and will not give him up to the will of his foes. (*R.*)
2. The Lord will help him on his bed of pain, he will bring him back from sickness to health. As for me, I said: 'Lord, have mercy on me, heal my soul for I have sinned against you.' (*R.*)
3. If you uphold me I shall be unharmed and set in your presence for evermore. Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel from age to age. Amen. Amen. (*R.*)

Second Reading 2 Cor 1:18-22 A reading from the second letter of St Paul to the Corinthians

The son of God, Jesus Christ, was not yes and no; in him it is always yes.

I swear by God's truth, there is no Yes and No about what we say to you. The Son of God, the Christ Jesus that we proclaimed among you – I mean Silvanus and Timothy and I – was never Yes and No: with him it was always Yes, and however many the promises God made, the Yes to them all is in him. That is why it is 'through him' that we answer Amen to the praise of God. Remember it is God himself who assures us all, and you, of our standing in Christ, and has anointed us, marking us with his seal and giving us the pledge, the Spirit, that we carry in our hearts.

The word of the Lord.

Gospel Acclamation See Lk 4:18

Alleluia, alleluia! The Lord sent me to bring Good News to the poor and freedom to prisoners. Alleluia!

Gospel Mk 2:1-12

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

When Jesus returned to Capernaum, word went round that he was back; and so many people collected that there was no room left, even in front of the door. He was preaching the word to them when some people came bringing him a paralytic carried by four men, but as the crowd made it impossible to get the man to him, they stripped the roof over the place where Jesus was; and when they had made an opening, they lowered the stretcher on which the paralytic lay. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, 'My child, your sins are forgiven.' Now some scribes were sitting there, and they thought to themselves, 'How can this man talk like that? He is blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God?' Jesus, inwardly aware that this was what they were thinking, said to them, 'Why do you have these thoughts in your hearts? Which of these is easier: to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven" or to say, "Get up, pick up your stretcher and walk"? But to prove to you that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,' – he said to the paralytic – 'I order you: get up, pick up your stretcher, and go off home.' And the man got up, picked up his stretcher at once and walked out in front of everyone, so that they were all astounded and praised God saying, 'We have never seen anything like this.'

The Gospel of the Lord.

Scripture Commentary

by Brendan Byrne SJ

The first reading and the Gospel this week are clearly linked around the theme of the divine power to forgive sin – though the fact that Jesus, in the Gospel, offers such forgiveness to a paralysed man whom he restores to health, needs careful handling. More of this later.

The first reading, from (Second) Isaiah 43:18-19, 21-22, 24-25, continues the 'New Exodus' theme that is a feature of this part of Isaiah: the wonders of the first Exodus (from Egypt) are going to be surpassed when God brings back captive Israel across the desert to her own land. The truly remarkable thing, however, is that God will do this 'new thing' for a people that has been unfaithful – for a people that is both itself 'weary' and that has 'wearied' and burdened God with its sins. In the final statement, in language that echoes the proclamation of the divine name to Moses in Sinai ('I am who I am', Exod 3:14), we hear a divine self-identification as 'I, I am the One who blots out your transgressions for my own sake and I will not remember your sins'. For Israel's God it is one and the same thing to liberate from captivity and to liberate from the burden of sin.

In the Gospel, Mark 2:1-12, Jesus will make a very similar claim. The episode recounted has features of both a healing miracle and a controversy story, a combination presenting some problems for interpretation. The setting is striking enough. Jesus is still at that early stage of his ministry when everyone is pressing to hear him. Unable to get access to Jesus as he preaches in a crowded house, four men carrying a paralysed man on a stretcher resort to the dramatic strategy of removing part of the roof and lowering him down in front of Jesus. (The procedure, in Mark's narrative, presupposes the typical house of common people in Palestine in Jesus' day, where the roof consisted of beams of wood placed across walls of stone or mudbrick). Jesus sees in the efforts made by the four bearers a striking example of faith – a faith which, as always, provides the necessary context for the exercise of his divine power. Significantly, it is 'their faith' that is mentioned. We are not told anything about the faith of the paralysed man they are carrying. Community faith suffices.

Jesus' response, saying to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven', is surprising. Why, in a context where healing is obviously what is sought, does he first address the issue of sin? The conjunction – sickness and forgiveness – can give rise to the suggestion that a sinful life lies behind the man's affliction, namely, that it is a divine punishment for sin. This is, however, a conclusion that several significant strands in the Bible challenge and overthrow. We may think of the Book of Job as a whole and Jesus' own clear words in connection with the man born blind in John 9:1-3, where he explicitly refutes the conclusion of his disciples that the man's blindness was a result of sin.

Jesus' words need not, in fact, be taken as implying a connection between physical suffering and sin. That he first assures the man that his sins are forgiven reflects the general proclamation of the Gospel (1:14-15) which, in continuity with the baptism of John, is a summons to repentance and conversion in virtue of the onset of the Rule (Kingdom) of God. This is an assurance which every human being who approaches the Gospel in faith needs to hear – and this paralysed man is no exception.

What the conjunction of forgiveness and healing in the episode does is make the latter (the healing) the *physical, outward manifestation* ('so that you may know ...') of the former (the forgiveness), which is necessarily something interior and hidden. Jesus' power to forgive sin is challenged. The scribes see in his assurance nothing but blasphemy, since, as the kind of biblical passage heard in the first reading makes abundantly clear, forgiveness of sin is the prerogative of God alone. The physical miracle that Jesus works – the man's immediately getting up and carrying out the stretcher before the eyes of all – attests his power to release human beings from the captivity of sin authoritatively in God's name. Beyond and beneath the healing miracle is a powerful statement of the status and role of Jesus.

In the second reading, 2 Cor 1:13-22, Paul defends himself against the charge of inconsistency with a most attractive reflection upon the divine faithfulness manifest in Jesus. With him there is nothing negative or wavering. He is the 'Yes' to all the promises of God. Brendan Byrne SJ

Scripture Commentary by Dianne Bergant CSA

Isaiah describes the uniqueness of the regeneration that God's own saving power would effect. Israel's faith was based on remembrance of the liberating events of the past. To be told to 'remember not . . . consider not' must have been unsettling. The prophet was most likely calling the people away from inordinate dependence on the past, a dependence that prevented them from seeing the astonishing new thing that God was accomplishing before their very eyes. The new thing that God wished to accomplish was a new creation. Though they were sinners, the merciful God would wipe out their guilt. Then they would be witnesses to God's graciousness to the rest of the world.

The psalm declares blessed the one who is solicitous for the needy, for when that person is in distress, God will act as deliverer. Deliverance takes two forms, protection against enemies and restoration to health. In the past the psalmist prayed that God would be gracious and forgive. It is clear that this prayer has been heard. The psalmist has been forgiven and this forgiveness is both a form of divine healing and a witness to others of God's mercy. The psalmist's confession of sin is a sign of moral integrity. It encourages the psalmist to make a bold request of God: 'Let me stand before you forever.' The psalm ends with a doxology, a praise of God.

Paul defends his apostolic ministry. He bases his defence on the trustworthiness of God. This is a bold tactic, but then the ministry itself and the message on which it is grounded are bold as well. He argues strenuously that his ministry never demonstrated inconsistency. Quite the contrary, it has been as constant as God has been faithful. God's faithfulness can be seen in the consistency of Jesus as evident in his obedience, the trustworthiness of God found in the fulfilment of the promises made throughout the ages, and in God's gift of the Spirit with which Christians are sealed. As significant as this Trinitarian theology may be in itself, here it

serves as a defence of Paul's ministry.

The details of the gospel miracle story are dramatically recounted. The ingenuity and persistence of the friends of the paralysed man are remarkable. Their faith in Jesus moved him to act. He spoke words of forgiveness rather than healing and thus set up the conflict between himself and the scribes who were present in the crowd. The issue was the authority by which Jesus claimed to be able to forgive sin. While the scribes were correct in believing that only God can forgive, they were blind in not recognising the power of divine forgiveness active in Jesus. They were outraged by his appropriation of divine authority. The crowds gave glory to God; only the scribes were unbelieving. © Dianne Bergant CSA

Homily by Richard Leonard SJ

Given that Mark's Gospel was the first one in the New Testament to be written, today's extract could be the earliest evidence we have of intercessory prayer, or better still, intercessory action. The crowd around Jesus is so packed, that the friends of the man with paralysis get creative and, literally, go in over the top. There is no sense in today's Gospel of 'we shouldn't or, 'we can't'. There is only boldness in presenting the man before Jesus. Imagine if his friends didn't do this, he might never have known Jesus' healing touch.

There have been moments when we have all felt desperate. Sometimes when we are ill in mind, body or spirit, or worse still, when someone we love is in a similar state, we can have bloodied hands from banging on the doors of heaven, asking for God to do a miracle.

In today's Gospel Jesus heals the man dramatically presented before him by his friends. While the physical restitution was the most obvious, it would not have been the only part of the man Jesus healed that day. We can imagine the memories and other afflictions that would have accompanied the man's paralysis. There would have been emotional and spiritual restoration as well.

So to us. If, for all our efforts, our actions and prayers are not answered the way we would like, we can be left feeling abandoned and forgotten by God. It is not a cop out, however, to console ourselves with the thought that maybe what we are seeking is the wrong gift from God, either for ourselves or the one for whom we are praying. There are many types of paralysis, equally crippling, and not all of them are physically obvious.

Whatever of the matter of the request we place before Christ, today's story informs us about Jesus' attitude toward our suffering. Jesus initially tells the man 'Go, your sins are forgiven.' Later he says, 'Get up, pick up your mat and walk.' In first century Palestine, both statements were almost identical. To us, these statements are vastly different. In Jesus' time all illness was a curse from God because of sin. Jesus counters this belief by saying that no illness is from God, no suffering is sent to us because of sin.

How many of us need to hear this? After years of thinking our own paralysis has come about because God is punishing us, this Sunday we hear the Lord say, 'Get up, pick up your mat and walk.' This does not necessarily mean our problems will not need attention in the future. This side of death we are always unfinished creations, God's 'work in progress'. But we are reminded that it is always Christ's desire to make us well and whole on every level where we need healing and peace. We also see the power of friends who support and pray for us and lay our needs before God. What an act of unselfish love intercessory prayers and actions really are.

In this Eucharist may we leave behind the Christian heresy that holds that God uses spiritual, mental or physical pain to get even with us. In its place may we hold onto the image that whatever our paralysis might be, whatever our mat might look like, with the support of selfless friends we can rise up this Sunday and walk into freedom and new life. © Richard Leonard SJ

Reflection

by Dianne Bergant CSA

The man who suffered from paralysis was an evangeliser both while he was afflicted and after he had been cured. Before the healing, he witnessed to his faith in Jesus by the mere fact of allowing himself to be brought to the healer. After he had been cured, his very presence announced to the world the healing power of God.

Those who are suffering have much to teach us. They can be living examples of patience in the midst of pain, human dignity in the presence of poverty or diminishment, thoughtfulness toward others even when in great need. People who have learned to accept the hardships that they cannot change often radiate a quality of peace that is astonishing. Perhaps the greatest lesson that they can teach is total dependence on God.

Whether or not we are relieved of our misfortunes, the fundamental message of the reign of God is newness of life. It is the radical shifting of human existence – those whose lives were wasteland, see them flowing with refreshing waters; those who are searching for meaning, have the word of God preached to them; those who are paralysed, stand up and walk; the promises that God made are fulfilled. Most important, those who have sinned are forgiven. The redemptive power of God is set loose in the world. We can prepare for it. We can remove the roof and lower the mat, but the radical newness comes from God. This is the good news.

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