

The 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 43: 18-25

Psalm 41

2 Corinthians 1: 18-22

Mark 2: 1-12

The readings today are about restoration of God's holy people. Isaiah is talking to the holy people of God when they were in exile in Babylon. In 581BC King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had come down to Jerusalem and laid siege to the city. When the city fell, he burned down the temple and the palaces, pulled down the walls and fortifications, and led the people away into captivity. In their shock and grief they wondered why this had happened to them. Many thought God had abandoned them; the time of exile brought about a huge crisis of faith. In our reading Isaiah the prophet comes with reassurance from God. "Do not remember the former things... I am about to do a new thing." This beautiful poetry declares that God is indeed with them and will restore them. God will act to transform the state of exile into a state of promise. God will turn exile into a homecoming. It will

be a time of healing, reconciliation and restoration. God will turn the death of exile into a new Exodus. Reinforcing the message of hope, God promises to do again what God did for the people when they were enslaved in Egypt. This will be an even greater Exodus. In lyrical fashion the poet describes the transformation of the condition of exile. The dry parched land of the desert will become well watered, life-giving territory for the exiles as they return home. Even wild animals in the desert who struggle to survive will have ample water. The water becomes a measure of God's capacity to transform and make new. Today we will baptise Chloe Agnew. In baptism God acts. Today through water God will welcome Chloe home to life in Christ; the Promised Land which is hers and ours.

The church has placed the promise of hope from the prophet Isaiah alongside the next episode of Mark's story of Jesus. Mark's gospel is setting out to answer a very important question, "Who is Jesus." Just like the Isaiah passage above, Mark's gospel was written when the church was facing a major crisis of faith around 70AD. There were two factors bringing about this crisis. First the Romans had just destroyed the temple in

Jerusalem and Jew and Christian alike were scattered throughout the empire. This was a huge shock; just like the Boxing Day Tsunami in 2006 or the 9/11 attacks in America in 2001. Secondly, the disciples who had lived with Jesus and who carried the memory of his teaching and his life and death were dying. So what would the future hold? Would the church survive or was it going to die with them? How would they ensure the Good News would be faithfully transmitted to future generations? Because of this crisis in faith, Mark's church took the radical move of producing this gospel, the first story of Jesus to be written down. It is a powerful story of hope arising out of crisis; a story intended to show forth the true identity of Jesus and to help early Christians be faithful disciples in difficult times.

The gospel readings in recent weeks have focused on the early ministry of Jesus; his itinerant teaching ministry in Galilee and the miracles he performed. The early church understood this healing ministry of Jesus in terms of suffering servanthood. Jesus will be the suffering servant imaged in Isaiah. He will confront and absorb evil in all its shape and forms and will turn

the desert of oppression and hopelessness into a watered land of hope. This is what the miracles of Jesus are all about. In his person he is the embodiment of the Kingdom of God. He is empowered by the Spirit, the presence of the creative energy of God. Within his presence all the distortions in creation are confronted and put to right. Along the way this means challenging the authority of priest and Scribe, so that Jesus becomes a marked man who can no longer go about openly. Already, no town offers him refuge, and the question of what the miracles might mean is eclipsed by a the people's hunger for power.

Today we have before us another healing story: the healing of the paralytic. In this story the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders boils over into the open. This time the issue is the forgiveness of sins. In the first century, it was commonly thought that illnesses and physical disabilities were brought about because someone had sinned and the religious leaders saw it as their role to protect the purity of the community of faith. Disability was a signpost pointing to sin somewhere in your family so that meant the disabled were prevented from full

participation in the community of faith. For instance, King David himself banned the disabled from the temple. Physical disfigurement was a terrible curse. For this paralysed man, it meant never hearing the Good News of God's forgiving love, and so, unable to access the forgiveness of God, the result was condemnation to a life of permanent exclusion and grinding poverty.

So when the man is lowered in through the roof of the building in which Jesus was present, the first thing Jesus does, is to address the man's spiritual well being. The man hears, possibly for the first time in his life, "Your sins are forgiven!" God loves you and accepts you. Be received into the community of the redeemed. Already, this is like a bomb going off in this man's heart. But Jesus is raising a deeper ideological issue. The language Jesus uses for forgiveness from sin is from the debt code (as he does in the Lord's Prayer). So literally Jesus pronounces the forgiveness of all this man's debt; hence restoring the man's social wholeness as well as his spiritual well being. To complete his restoration the man walks. He is made

physically whole so that spiritual and social restoration is linked with his bodily restoration. The crowd is utterly amazed.

The scribes are incensed and angry, probably green with jealousy. Their complaint is none other but that God alone can forgive debt. "Who is this Jesus who puts himself in the place of God?" they ask. But they are not really defending God here. They are defending their own position of power. They see themselves as the sole interpreters of the Torah, the ones who control purity and indebtedness. But once again, Jesus has dared to put himself in their place. Faced with this threat, the scribes accuse Jesus with the strongest possible language, "He blasphemes!" Ultimately this will be the charge brought against Jesus when he is condemned to death: that he put himself in the place of God.

Into this highly charged atmosphere, we notice that Jesus calls himself "Son of Man" for the first time. This title is taken from the book of Daniel's vision of an apocalyptic judgement. The key point is that Jesus identifies himself as a heavenly person claiming authority on earth. The conflict, therefore, is hotting up

and extends Jesus' confrontation with the "demon" of scribal authority that serves to make God's kingdom smaller and people locks into cycles of poverty and oppression. The political and spiritual struggle is commenced: the Son of Man is wresting away from the scribal class their authority on earth. This will be a costly ministry. Jesus could have run from all this. He could have said it's all too hard and the cost too great. But he refuses. His leadership is sacrificial. He stays connected. He loves us to end, never runs away and pays the price for bringing restoration and healing and the forgiveness of God. It is inspirational and transformative leadership that brings judgement on the religious apparatus of the day and brings Good News to the ordinary people of God.

Jesus wants disciples today who are inspired with a faith that is ready to make similar sacrifices to embody the love and compassion of God for people today. He wants to inspire in us a faith that the Good News of the gospel can overcome evil in all its forms and change the world. Our task is to be partners with Jesus in this task of bringing restoration, forgiveness and reconciliation to a broken world. This will be a painful ministry,

because forgiveness and healing are not cheap commodities. Four years ago I met Bishop Osmers, a New Zealander who has ministered in Southern African for many years. His willingness to confront the South African apartheid system opened him to violent reprisal in the form of a letter bomb; not to mention many death threats. Bishop Osmers has campaigned for the forgiveness of 3rd world debt, the elimination of corruption in African governments, and a programme to treat HIV Aids. The ministry of forgiveness and healing and reconciliation, therefore, is costly and hard. It may involve us making structural changes in communities; in bringing together people who have wounded each other deeply, and helping them to work through their pain face to face in a way that avoids retribution. We have to face the same challenges within ourselves. We pray for God's forgiveness all the time, but unless we accompany that with a willingness to put aside unhealthy attitudes and behaviours, we miss out on the fullness of life God has to offer.

We are now approaching the season of Lent, a season when we take time out to reflect on our journey with God. We might use this story today as a beginning point for our reflection. Where in

our lives are we paralysed? Where are we in need of Christ's restoration? How can we bring our friends to Jesus? As we prepare for Lent, let this be a time of reflection and preparation to make Lent what it should be; a return to forgiveness, and helping each other in our pilgrimage to God.