

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time + 8 Sept 2024 + Isa 35:4-7 + James 2:1-5 + Mk 7:31-37

Today's Gospel is a challenge for me. You see, I have a niece and nephew who are deaf. While they have overcome a lot and do amazingly well, it is hard to watch them suffer. Perhaps there is someone in your life who is afflicted with a painful physical disability, such as deafness or blindness. Maybe you are the caregiver for such a person. If so, you know that those who, for some reason that only God knows, are born without the abilities that we can so easily take for granted—they must carry a very heavy cross each and every day.

The focus of our readings today is *not* meant to give us a complete and final answer to the question of why the innocent suffer. The Catechism says, "*there is not a single aspect of the Christian message that is not, in part, an answer to the question of evil.*" But I believe that they can help us to at least begin to understand this very difficult reality; a reality that can cause some people to go so far as to give up their faith in a good God.

First of all, we might ask, why is there suffering in the world? There is suffering in the world because while creation is good (as we read in the Book of Genesis), it is not perfect. As St. Paul says in the 1st Letter to the Corinthians, *the form of this world is passing away*. The world in which we live is fallen; it has been damaged by sin, and has not yet been made completely new in Christ. And so there are "privations," or we could say, "missing pieces," in the world. People suffer when they lack a certain good, such as hearing or sight, that is expected in the natural, "good" ordering of creation. Sometimes people suffer the consequences of their own evil actions—we call this "*moral evil*". Remember, God made us as free creatures so that we could choose whether or not to love and obey Him. Our free choices have real consequences. But people also and often suffer even though they have *not* sinned against God—they suffer because of what is called "*physical evil*"—natural disasters, deafness, chronic pain, etc. This kind of evil is much harder for us to understand.

So why does God allow physical evil—that is, evil that is *not* the result of a person's free will? There is much we could say here. But ultimately, we can only begin an answer based on what God has revealed about Himself to us. And the fullness of this revelation is the person of Jesus Christ. *Jesus Christ is God's answer* to all of our questions, such as the difficult mystery of innocent human suffering. And what does Jesus reveal to us?

Well, the Gospels reveal to us first and foremost a Jesus who is the *Lord*. The word "*Lord*" comes from the Greek word *Kurios* (as in when we pray *Kyrie, eleison* or *Lord, have mercy*), and it means "one with authority over people, things, or time." The Gospels reveal to us, over and over again, that Jesus has authority even over suffering and evil! Our Gospel today illustrates this point exactly. Jesus chooses to take His ministry beyond the Jewish world and into Gentile territory—to Tyre, Sidon, and the Decapolis (the "ten cities"). A crowd brings a deaf man to Him, and Jesus restores his hearing and speech.

Now Jesus could have just said to him, “*be healed,*” and it would have been so. But this was not how he did it. Rather, Jesus chose to heal the man in an almost shocking way; that is, with the fullness of His own humanity. He puts His finger in the man’s ear, spits on His own finger, and then touches the man’s tongue. We can say there is a *sacramental* aspect to this manner of healing; meaning, Jesus uses the *sign* of His humanity—His fingers, and even His spittle—to reveal the healing power of His divinity. But the purpose of this sign is not just to heal the man physically: above all, Jesus wants people to put their *faith* in Him as *Lord*; that all ears be opened to His Word and all eyes recognize that He is the Son of God!

This too explains why Jesus spent most of His earthly life teaching, healing, and serving the poor. Now, if it is rightly said that our hearts are revealed by the way in which we choose to spend our time, then it must be true that the “heart” of Jesus is a heart for the poor, for the suffering, for the forgotten. God must have a special place in the Kingdom of His heart for those who, in their suffering, cannot rely on their own strength, but instead must turn to Him in absolute faith. As St. James says in our 2nd reading today, *God chose the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs to the kingdom that he promised to those who love him.*

We also see Jesus’ “heart” in the next detail of this healing. Jesus looks up to heaven—we could say, He turns His attention to the Father, and He “*groans*”. Elsewhere in Scripture, that word “*groans*” is used in the sense of an expression of grief that wells up from deep within a person. In His own humanity, Jesus is gathering up the anguish of the whole of suffering humankind, and bringing it before the Father. And then He says: *be opened!* Jesus, true man and true God, pronounces His judgment as Lord over all innocent human suffering, declaring that it no longer has the last word. God has the last word! Suffering is no longer just an absurdity. Christ now opens it up to the possibility of redemption.

Finally, we are faced with the very difficult reality that even though Jesus has come, the innocent still suffer in this world. We are like the people of Judah in the time of Isaiah’s prophecy in our 1st reading today—we are in exile from our true homeland in heaven, and so we suffer. But we wait with hope, because we have been promised that our God will come again with His *divine recompense to save us*. On that day, He will open forever the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf, and He will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

This is our hope—this is the faith of the Church. And we know it is true. The greatest of all moral evils was the suffering and death of the only absolutely innocent man: Jesus Christ. And yet Jesus was vindicated in His resurrection from the dead, and He now reigns as Lord in His glorified body in heaven. And because this is true, we can also know for certain that all of those who suffer innocently in this world will someday be vindicated in the next, if they cling to faith in the Lord. In heaven we will have a glorified body, and there all will be able to hear and walk and speak and praise God proclaiming: *He has done all things well!*