

Sermon by Fr. Harry Allagree – 2/5/12

The context of today's first reading (Isaiah 40:21-31) is the Israelites' exile in Babylon. God is about to liberate them through an unlikely figure: Cyrus II of Persia. The reading today comes just after the section in Chapter 40 where: 1) God has announced a new beginning, a new epoch; 2) God prods the people to begin preparing to return from their long exile, and also for God's coming in glory; 3) God's incomparability as Creator of all is highlighted and emphasized against merely human nations and empires who, compared to God, are nothing.

God begins by asking rhetorically: "*Do you all get it yet??*" *God* is the origin, and the in-between, and the end of everything in our lives.

"*Who created these?*", God asks, pointing at the magnificent and vast created world. It's only in the first lines of Genesis and in this passage that the Hebrew word *bara* = *created* is used. It is God who is the Source of beginnings in our lives, God who is the Source sustaining us, and God who is the Source bringing everything to completion, in love. "*The Lord is the everlasting God.*" And God emphasizes this so much because we forget it so much, especially when preoccupied with the pain and suffering and loss in which we frequently find ourselves.

In v. 27 Israel is on the "pity pot" because of such narrow vision: "*My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God.*" After all of God's demonstrated promises and proofs throughout their past history, they're frustrated, fearful that God has forgotten them and left them alone. If they could look long enough at the big picture, they'd see that human suffering is only temporary, and more, that it's a necessary part of God's bigger design. "*God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless...those who wait for the Lord [and not for the "good old days" or "what might have been"] shall renew their strength...*"

Mark's Gospel passage (1:29-39) helps us with this message from a different slant. There are two parts. Part I takes place at Capernaum. Jesus is "on the road" which will eventually lead to Jerusalem and to his death. (Hints of Lent, soon to come, and very appropriate on this Sunday, traditionally known as *Septuagesima* Sunday: 70 days before Easter.) There's a progression leading from Christ's Baptism, to his being led into the desert to be tested, then on to his calling those who would take up his cause, and finally to his being on the road to do his ministry. Mark's message is that Jesus' agenda is the same as that of his Father and of the Spirit: namely, to bring God's reign to reality.

You may notice some similarities to last week's Gospel where: 1) Jesus, acting on his own, heals someone, the demon-possessed man; and 2) demons are present. They mess up human lives and they fear Jesus. The reason is because they "know" who Jesus is and that they are incapable of being present in our lives along with the Holy One. Though many of the afflicted and of those standing around don't understand, the demons definitely know who's in charge.

As Jesus finishes a teaching session in the synagogue, Mark notes that he's invited to Peter's house where Peter's mother-in-law presumably lives with him and his wife. Though Peter's wife isn't mentioned specifically here, later, in 1 Corinthians, Paul very clearly refers to her as possibly accompanying Peter on his mission. Perhaps the mother-in-law had the flu: "*she was in*

bed with a fever”, always risky for an older person. In his quiet, gentle way Jesus comes to her and takes her hand. As the fever subsides, she gets up out of the bed, and heads for the kitchen to get them all something to eat, as any good Jewish mother would do! Perhaps Mark inserts this little detail in his Gospel to hold up the mother-in-law as an example to us in looking beyond her own ills to the needs of others.

As so often happens in Jesus’ ministry, it doesn’t take long for the news to get around that he’s done something dramatic, even though he tries so hard to keep a lid on it [what the biblical scholars refer to as the “*Messianic Secret*”]. By sundown sick and possessed people are lined up, taking numbers at the home in order to take advantage of a free healing by the Rabbi. Jesus responds tirelessly, healing those with “various diseases” and casting out “many demons”, whom Jesus doesn’t permit to speak.

Mark then shifts immediately to Part II of the reading which takes place the following morning. It represents Mark’s understanding of Jesus’ goals and objectives in proclaiming God’s reign as Jesus himself models them.

First, Jesus is up very early, before dawn, in order to pray. You get the feeling, reading this, that it was part of Jesus’ regular routine. He goes to a “*deserted place*”, though obviously not a desert, a place of silence. He communes with the Holy Source of his healing ministry and of his preaching power. But his peace is short-lived, because Peter and the gang come hunting for him, and loudly announce that “*Everyone*” is looking for Jesus! [Every parish rector/vicar on Sunday morning can identify with this!] It’s not that they’ve suddenly gotten inspired by his preaching about God’s coming reign. They’re focussed on “getting healed”, getting a hand-out, preoccupied with their frustrations, their lack and their emptiness.

Jesus stops the disciples in their tracks by announcing: “*We’re moving on, to the neighboring towns, so that I can get on with preaching the message, the Good News: ‘for that is what I came to do.’*” And Mark notes that he did just that: preached “*throughout Galilee*” in the synagogues and cast out demons. Now think about this for a minute. Suppose you’d brought yourself, or perhaps your spouse or your child to Capernaum, in an impossible physical or mental or spiritual condition, for healing, or at least for advice or a kind word -- and the healer says he’s moving on! What would you be thinking and feeling as you watch him and his band trudge down the road, away from your village?? What do you do now?? Where do you go?? Who will help?? And how, at that moment, would you be feeling toward God?? The fact is that we’ve all probably been there at that place.

Our lives are constantly full of new beginnings, both in happy times and, ironically, in the midst of suffering and difficulty. Some years ago, just after a friend of mine split up with her partner, I reminded her that she could bet that some sort of new call from God was probably in that very situation. Our whole task as human beings and as Christian human beings is to prepare for return from *our* exiles, and to prepare for God’s coming in glory in our lives. That won’t necessarily be a dramatic end-time event, but rather a quiet coming of God’s reign, through our simple ministries, which we help bring about in our own and others’ lives.

We need to continually ask ourselves: “*Do we really get it?*?”: i.e., the vision of Christ to bring all together in God who is Love through Jesus. Even when we feel left out, frustrated, fearful, angry, God sustains us and renews our strength. Perhaps the best way to know and to recognize that is in and through our demonstrated love for one another.

The Spirit of Love enables us to do this through prayer; through proclaiming the Good News of Love; through speaking the truth to power, when necessary, whether in political or religious realms; through healing others by our thoughts, words, and deeds.

Over the past several years there’ve been many times when I felt a bit like those Israelites whom God addresses in Isaiah’s reading: on my “pity pot”, bemoaning “*My way is hidden from the Lord...*”, as I’ve watched the progression of my son’s illness, and almost his death at one point. I know only too well what it’s like to feel left behind in frustration, anxiety, and agitation. At the same time, though, I’ve discovered that prayer has become increasingly important, and I’ve uncomfortably experienced God confronting me, as God did the Israelites, with questions: “*Have you not known; have you not heard...God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless...*”

I think that the way I really began to “get it” was through my own dear son, in the midst of his daily struggle to keep going, when in 2009 he sent me a poem he’d written:

*In all of us there is a meadow that exists.
It is the place where God exists.
The harsh weather dries the meadow out
to the point where there is no growth.*

*How can it be a meadow still?
No green, no moisture, nothing that one can walk through
feeling the soft tickle of spires of thin grass on the legs.*

*God lives in the deep cracks of the earth.
God lives in the constant, cool breeze
that flows through the vast and expansive land we [inhabit].*

*Gently touch the cracks of the earth -- the dry cold earth --
and God will always grow the green soft grace that soothes the
soul.*

*You just don't need to see it or smell it
to know that it will grow.*