

September 12, 2021

Is 50:5-9a; Jas 2:14-18; Mk 8:27-35

This guy Joe was doing some work at his office downtown; it was about 11:30 in the morning. There was a mix of people in the area: people in nice suits or fashionable dresses in shiny shoes who worked in offices, workers who were making deliveries or fixing something in the buildings, a number of customers going in and out of the offices and shops, and also those who looked in rough shape. Joe went out to get something for lunch, and was approached by a homeless man in very shabby clothes. This man, Mike, asked Joe for money. He didn't want to give him any because he wasn't sure what he would do with it. But he remembered what we heard in the second reading: *If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and [you say] to them, "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well," but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it?* So Joe invited Mike to join him for lunch.

Joe and Mike ate lunch together, and as a result of the conversation that they had, Joe stopped with Mike at a store nearby and bought him some clean socks and underwear and some hygiene supplies. Through all of this, Joe noticed that people were looking at him in a strange way - and their looks made him feel uncomfortable. Joe and Mike said goodbye to each other on the street corner. As Joe passed some people just inside the door of his building, one of them said: "Hey ... what were you doing there?", Joe said, "Jesus gave me the chance to care for him in one of his children, I just accepted the invitation." He cringed a bit as he said it. Joe headed back to his office and heard a laugh mocking him as he went further up the hall. Back at his desk he paused a moment to ask God to use what he did for Mike to make other people aware that God cares for us by sometimes using one of his children to help another.

Jesus also suffered being laughed at and ridiculed. This did not stop him from continuing to complete his mission. The Prophet Isaiah foretold the sufferings that the Messiah would have to undergo, and the way that he would endure ridicule trusting in God for help: *I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard, my face I did not shield from buffets and spitting. The Lord God is my help, therefore I am not disgraced.*" Jesus cared for those in need, but it did not stop there. He was not just this guy with healing powers who came to heal the sick. He was not just this great teacher instructing us how to live. Jesus worked on two levels. First, there was the hands-on teaching, healing, guiding that improved peoples' lives on earth, and also there was also another dimension to his mission. That of leading people to

God through these actions, and by actively sacrificing himself, and by that sacrifice opening the way to eternal life. We can't just reduce Jesus to one or the other role.

The question Jesus asks in the Gospel is very significant for each of us: *Who do you say that I am?* Is Jesus a prophetic historical figure, a teacher who came to explain to us the way people are supposed to live together? Is Jesus an announcer of us earning a prize in heaven if we do certain things? Does Jesus have a power to save us from an eternity of spiritual death in hell? Is He found in a mysterious presence in the Eucharist, in others, in the Holy Spirit that we are called to believe in? Jesus asks: *Who do you say that I am?* By knowing this, we can grasp who we are too, for He calls us to imitate Him. Are we to be passive faithful individuals of prayer and faith, or are we to be active in the world? Jesus combined both of these in his ministry. We are called to that same two-fold ministry as members of the Body of Christ. We are called to act like Joe - both to reduce material suffering in our brothers and sisters with the same love and mercy of Jesus, and also by those same actions to lead others to Christ. This present world, the eternal future, our faith, and what we do - they are all tied up together.

In the Gospel, Peter didn't want Jesus to die. He was looking at the present only. He missed the bigger picture of who Jesus was, what the Messiah was. He didn't realize that it was only by Jesus dying and rising that we all could be united to him and in that way we could fill the world with his presence. The end of the mission was not just the making of a better world here on earth - the making of a better world here on earth is a means for achieving the great end of attaining the eternal life of heaven. We must do good for others not merely out of sense of civic duty but acting out of our faith in Jesus. And let's not shy back from telling others why we do this, but let the faith that underlies these works show. Our actions have the power to lead others to God while at the same time providing immediate assistance to those in need.

Who do you say that I am? If we have faith in Jesus, we will do loving and self-sacrificing things, not because they are an end in themselves, but because they help us to more fully be like Jesus and engage our faith and make it alive and powerful. *Who do you say that I am?* The more we explore this in faith, the more our path of what to do in works will be clear. This path of faith and works will lead us to times of ridicule, and even to times of lower material security that will test our faith. Peter needed to learn that what seems to be a bad thing in this world's way of looking can be transformed; we need to see that if we are able to follow Jesus - we can be led from suffering to the resurrection Jesus promises to all who believe and follow him in His works.