

The readers who proclaim the Scriptures for us at mass take their responsibility very seriously. They always come to mass having prepared during the week. They read and re-read the Scripture passages very carefully and then proclaim them very clearly at mass. They are wonderful people and very humble. And shy at times as well. Public speaking is said to be the most frightening thing a person can do. So it's no surprise that our readers don't want to draw attention to themselves. For example, the first reading today. If I had asked our reader to read it with the same emotion that Isaiah proclaimed it originally, the reader would probably look at me like I had two heads! The reason is because this first reading is full of deep emotion. Through the mouth of Isaiah God is exasperated with the Israelites. They are in exile in Babylon and Isaiah had been trying to lift the faith of the Jews. Isaiah repeated God's promise of the coming freedom to go home, but no one was listening. Isaiah said that if God's actions in the past no longer convinced them to believe in God's promises, then they should forget the events of the past and start looking at the things that were happening currently all around them. Yet Isaiah still had to acknowledge the unwillingness of the people to continue paying attention to God. They no longer prayed or worshiped in a way that expressed any gratitude. God was wearied by the very people He loved.

*Thus says the LORD:*

*Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

*In the desert I make a way, in the wasteland, rivers.*

*The people I formed for myself, that they might announce my praise.*

*Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob, for you grew weary of me, O Israel.*

*You burdened me with your sins, and wearied me with your crimes.*

*It is I, I, who wipe out, for my own sake, your offenses; your sins I remember no more.*

Today's gospel is the third in a series of healing stories by Jesus. It has a twist to it though. So far we have seen Jesus heal Simon Peter's mother-in-law and a leper—restoring both of them to a place in their families and communities. Today Jesus heals a man who is paralyzed—who cannot get around without the help of his friends. This story is different though. Jesus heals the paralytic because of the faith of his friends. He says, "Child your sins are forgiven." When He said this, Jesus was immediately accused of blaspheming. Why? Illness was considered a result of someone's sin—either the paralytic had sinned or someone in his family had sinned, causing the paralysis. What Jesus wanted to do was not only to heal these people physically; he wanted to heal their full standing in the community. To the people this was blasphemy because only God can forgive sin—no human has

this kind of authority. There are different reactions to this. Even the Scribes who witnessed this healing deny that Jesus has divine authority. Why? Because as long as they deny it they don't have to listen to him. The other witnesses were astounded beyond belief. But they don't believe. The only ones with faith we are told are the four friends who lowered the paralytic through the roof. And the crowd worked hard at blocking them even getting close to Jesus—the ones with real faith!

What is our reaction after hearing these three healing stories? Do we see Jesus as just a folk healer but nothing more? Do we see him as just a rabble-rouser who likes to irritate public authorities? Or do we see him as the answer to the promise of God long ago to the Israelites in exile—is he the “something new” that God is doing in our lives? Even if we put aside the ways God has worked in humanity in the past, can we begin to see how God has not given up on us, given up on his promise to us? And never will!

We are approaching another season of Lent this week; a time to go deeper into our hearts and do some “housecleaning.” We may need to shake out a few dusty rugs, sweep up some cluttered floors and begin afresh. So let's use Lent as our time to do this. Some ways we might accomplish this would be to develop a deeper sense of gratitude for all the gifts God gives us. To worship in gratitude as well instead of always expecting to receive something. Let's come to mass over the next several weeks ready to open our hearts to the Lord and reveal to him all that exists there—the good and the bad—and ask him to heal it. We as a people have become too self-sufficient and self-reliant. And in the process we have pushed God to the back of the cupboard to collect dust like an old rag. Just look at our world—the western world at one time was Christian. Now maybe only a portion still believes and the result has been detrimental to us—to our children, to our relationships. We are selfish and greedy. God can't exist in a heart full of that. He tells us in the first reading that he forgets our sins for His sake not ours. He wants to exist in a clean heart—and he even does the cleaning not us! We act like God is asking so much of us. We forget he knows what's best for us—better than we know ourselves! In return he asks that we be thankful—that we treat ourselves and our bodies as sacred dwellings of the Holy Spirit and use them to glorify Him and not the over sexualized culture in which we live. He asks us to allow him to use us to work out his plan of creating humanity by not regulating births. He gives us the strength to practice self control. We delude ourselves if we think sexual freedom and all forms of contraception are God's design for us. The Scriptures are clear. How we live out our faith will be the doorway for others to believe. Are we standing in the doorway preventing someone from coming to Christ or are we like the four friends

of faith bringing others to experience Jesus' healing touch? How we live our lives today has the power to make that difference. Let's begin afresh today.