

St Mary's Concord
A Reflection based on the Homily for
23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time
5 September 2021

READINGS YEAR B: Isaiah 45:4-7; James 2:1-5; Mark 7:31-37

To contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus all churches have been closed since 26 June 2021. One Mass is permitted so that it can be live-streamed to the parish YouTube channel and to the parish Facebook page: "St Mary's Parish Church Concord". The following reflection is based on the homily from that Mass.

"Don't judge a book by its cover" or so the saying goes. But of course, we do it all the time. The saying is not about books, it is about people and how we constantly judge others because of their appearance.

In recent weeks, you may have watched the documentary series on SBS TV that was hosted in turn by Kurt Fearnley, Noni Hazlehurst and Casey Donovan. Over three weeks they asked the question: 'What Does Australia Really Think About' Disability? Old People? Obesity?

The clear conclusion was that many people still do make judgements about others based on their appearance, their age and any disability they may have. But we are not unique. Sadly, that seems to be a common feature in many communities.

It was certainly happening in the community to whom the Letter of James was addressed. The Letter is one of the lesser known books of the NT. We began reading from it last Sunday and we will continue reading it, as our second reading, over the next three Sundays.

As we heard in today's reading, we can easily find ourselves reflecting the values of the world. "If a person with gold rings and fine clothes comes into your assembly, you say have a seat here please. If a poor person with dirty clothes comes in, you say, sit at my feet."

But that is not how God sees us. To make the point clearly, the writer says, "Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has God not chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith?" We need to change how we view the world.



How do we do that? At the beginning of the Letter of James, as we heard in last Sunday's reading, the author offers something very rare in the Bible: he attempts to give a formal definition of religion: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep one's self unstained from the world."

To keep one's self unstained from the world means that we do not allow "the world" to determine our values. The writer then goes on to stress that we also need to give witness to our values. We cannot be just hearers of the Word – we must give practical expression to our faith by giving help to those in need.

In the ancient world, and still in many places, the only safety-net for people was the extended family. "Orphans and widows" became almost a technical term for those who had no one to care for them, no extended family. And so, the true test for anyone who claims to have a relationship with God, will be how we care for those most in need.

But not only those with belief in God help others. Many good people help those in need and yet have no faith in God. They claim to be humanists. They help others because they believe in the dignity of every person.

Christians also believe in the dignity of every person, but we also believe that we are all children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ. Through the centuries that vision inspired Christians to establish hospitals and schools, particularly for the poor and those in need within their own local community.

We are now presented with so many global disasters that we can feel overwhelmed. We know that whatever we do, the world's problems will not suddenly be resolved. Wars and natural disasters will still happen. Women and children will still be forced to flee violence, not only in places like Afghanistan but also in our own cities and suburbs. Domestic violence, racism and prejudice will still exist.

We also take it for granted that the State will provide education and health care for those in need and so the danger is that Christian groups simply step back because the task seems to be too great.

But as we have seen in Mark's Gospel, we also believe that a transformation is taking place. Our first reading from the Prophet Isaiah set the scene. The prophet declared that these are the signs that will accompany the coming of the Messiah: the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped.





So, when Jesus restores the hearing of a man who was deaf, Mark's community understood that this was not just a healing miracle. It is about the transforming Word of God coming into the world.

Why this man? In the unfolding drama of Mark's Gospel, after his encounter with the scribes and the pharisees (last Sunday) Jesus has left the Jewish territory and has entered the Decapolis - a region of 10 Greek cities north- east of the sea of Galilee. And so, we assume that the deaf man was a gentile, a non-Jew.

In Mark's Gospel, this is about who gets to hear the Word of God. And the answer is all people without distinction, but especially those who live on the fringe.

At a very human level, when Jesus takes the deaf man aside from the crowd, he is respecting the man's dignity. This is not a show for the on-lookers. But we are also reminded, when Jesus ordered them to tell no one what he had done, that many had an expectation that the Messiah would come as a conquering king.

In the coming weeks as we continue to follow Mark's Gospel, we will be challenged to question our own expectations about what it means for us to be part of this unfolding transformation.

And so, for the moment we come back to the question that the author of the Letter of James asked his community. How do we welcome each other? How do we welcome the strangers, the outsider? How do we ensure that we are not making distinctions based on our prejudices?

The first step is to name our prejudice. To accept our own need to be transformed and then we will be more able to respect each other and to welcome others as our brothers and sisters in Christ.

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