

FIRST READING: Isaiah 66:18-21

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

Thus says the LORD: I know their works and their thoughts, and I come to gather nations of every language; they shall come and see my glory. I will set a sign among them; from them I will send fugitives to the nations: to Tarshish, Put and Lud, Mosoch, Tubal and Javan, to the distant coastlands that have never heard of my fame, or seen my glory; and they shall proclaim my glory among the nations. They shall bring all your brothers and sisters from all the nations as an offering to the LORD, on horses and in chariots, in carts, upon mules and dromedaries, to Jerusalem, my holy mountain, says the LORD, just as the Israelites bring their offering to the house of the LORD in clean vessels. Some of these I will take as priests and Levites, says the LORD.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 117:1, 2

***Go out to all the world and tell the Good News.***

Praise the Lord, all you nations; glorify him, all you peoples!

***Go out to all the world and tell the Good News.***

For steadfast is his kindness toward us, and the fidelity of the Lord endures forever.

***Go out to all the world and tell the Good News.***

SECOND READING: Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews:

Brothers and sisters, You have forgotten the exhortation addressed to you as children: "My son, do not disdain the discipline of the Lord or lose heart when reproved by him; for whom the Lord loves, he disciplines; he scourges every son he acknowledges." Endure your trials as "discipline"; God treats you as sons. For what "son" is there whom his father does not discipline? At the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain, yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained by it. So strengthen your drooping hands and your weak knees. Make straight paths for your feet, that what is lame may not be disjointed but healed.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: Luke 13:22-30

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

Jesus passed through towns and villages, teaching as he went and making his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few people be saved?" He answered them, "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough. After the master of the house has arisen and locked the door, then will you stand outside knocking and saying, 'Lord, open the door for us.' He will say to you in reply, 'I do not know where you are from.' And you will say, 'We ate and drank in

your company and you taught in our streets.' Then he will say to you, 'I do not know where you are from. Depart from me, all you evildoers!' And there will be wailing and grinding of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and you yourselves cast out. And people will come from the east and the west and from the north and the south and will recline at table in the kingdom of God. For behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."

The Gospel of the Lord.

### **Reflection for the 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday of the Year C**

Isaiah has introduced a new theme in today's reading. He has described the Diaspora, God's people in captivity in a new way. Up to this point the experience of the Jews in exile had been as chastisement or punishment for their collective sins. Jerusalem, the temple and their king were no more and they found themselves living among pagan people who did not know God. Yet, they remained faithful to God and to the covenant. Isaiah has interpreted their experience as part of God's plan to bring all people of the world to faith in God. Instead of chastisement, Diaspora became God's grace; a gift to the entire world and its entire people. God had chosen these exiled people to become witnesses of God to a pagan world. The curse had become the blessing with faith in God as its thriving force.

Let me take this theme and apply it to us. Our three parishes have closed and in a couple weeks Divine Savior will celebrate its final mass. I make no promises, but I hope to be the celebrant at that final mass on Sunday, September 4 at 9AM. No longer will we celebrate here ever again. I don't know about you, but that sure hurts me. I've been part of this community for some years, now, and feel it to be home. Could you be feeling the same way? As God worked through the exiles in Diaspora to share their faith in a wider waiting world, God is working among us now to bring the gifts we shared as a parish into a wider new parish. Our presence in the new and yet unnamed parish will guarantee the Spirit we have shared will enrich our new community. Our gifts can be gifts to the new forming community.

Hebrews, today, also has tried to find meaning in what, at first, seemed to be a very bad thing; persecution and the delay of Jesus' return to establish the kingdom of God. The author has called the experience as reproof or discipline as if the pain was by the hand of God. In fact, it was not by God's hand. Persecution of the early Church was at the hands of unbelievers who feared this new and powerful faith. People's prejudice and bigotry was the source, as it is today, for people to be suffering for their faith and beliefs. We still await Jesus return. They believed it would be soon and we expect it to come in someone else's future time and not ours. The message of today's scripture seeks to find meaning in the hardships and delay. Their faith and God's presence ensured that the Church would still be thriving today. It is important for us to hear that these early believers also had hard times. That the past was somehow better than the present is an illusion. It was by God's grace that the faith of those people endured to ours today.

As we face the challenge of forming a new parish community, the same grace of God works in us. It is the same faith we share and the same Holy Spirit that now guides us. God gave them all they needed to live a faithful life and remain witnesses of faith in Jesus to a waiting world. God now gives us all we need to blend three parish communities into one, new parish. God wanted

the early Church to thrive. Can God want less for us? No, God's love is infinite, eternal and unconditional. God remains God for us, in the present. We will succeed in our mission to become one; another step to Jesus' return and the Kingdom of God.

Peter asked Jesus an important question. Salvation is also our goal. What do we need to be saved? Faith in God and in Jesus. Faith is a gift that God has given us. We don't earn, deserve or in any way control God's gift. Just as we had no control over our birth, ethnicity or family into which we were born, faith operates in the same way. Neither can we get others to believe. The gift of faith is the purview of God alone and God gives the gift of it in God's own time and in God's own way.

This parable has a context. First of all, each of Jesus' parables has some real ambiguity about them. That was part of Jesus' genius. The ambiguity demands that the reader or listener stop and take notice to discern Jesus' deeper meaning. A clue is that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He went to Jerusalem to die on the cross. Jesus death was the means by which he saved humanity. He died on the cross in our place, which led to the forgiveness of our sins. At the time Jesus told this parable, his saving death was still to happen. Salvation was not yet a reality in human life. With Jesus' death, he died in our place. For the listeners of Jesus' parable, at that time, salvation had not yet arrived. We live in a post Passion, Easter and Pentecost world. All we need is the gift of faith to believe in God and in Jesus.

Jesus faced a phenomenon of his time. He was born to save his own people, the Jews, first. Many believed and came to faith, but most did not. From our perspective we may find it hard to accept that the people who heard him preach and witnessed his miracles and resurrection did not turn and accept faith in Jesus. But that's what happened. These are the people for whom he will not open the door to the Kingdom. Yet, Jesus has opened the door to us. We have received God's gift of faith. Can we pray for God to share the gift of faith to those who have not received it?

The early Church faced the same experience. Salvation was first offered to Jesus' own people, the Jews; those who witnessed his signs and heard his preaching. Those are the ones chosen first. As the numbers of Jews who came to faith began to dwindle, Gentiles, who are non-Jewish pagans, began to join the Church in faith. Gentiles are the last to be chosen by God. Yet, as the Church is mostly Gentile, Gentiles have been chosen as believers. The last have become first. There's a key word in this reading; some, not all. God is infinite, eternal and unconditional mercy wanting to forgive and save. In reading this passage we cannot forget Jesus' forgave sinners once and for all. Jesus had not yet died; he was still on his way there.

Even in our own families, there are some who don't believe. Do we want them to be excluded from the Kingdom of God? Of course not; we love them. We try to nag them, invite them and give them positive witness to our faith. Their salvation is not in our hands but God's hands. Personally, God's hands are a much better place to be than in mine. I have my limits; God has none. Here's something else. Do they love others? Jesus' one command is love; God, self and others. Since God is love, isn't God already part of a nonbeliever's life when they love? Perhaps they are not so far from God as we may think.

When we see these readings together, for God's people to enter Diaspora, God had a plan to spread Judaism throughout the pagan world. In our hardship and pain we can find God's presence, guidance and care; here we are, today, as a result. We have heeded God's grace of faith. Can we, in faith, place those who have not yet received God's gift into God's loving arms? If they love us and we love them, God is already a part of their lives whether they know it or not. As First John says, "My dear friends, let us love one another, because the source of love is God. Everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God." (1John 4:7 the Revised English Bible) As we are forming a new community in Christ, Jesus has opened the doors so we can enter; together.

May our path to our new community be clear and our way made secure in the love of Jesus.

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