

Conversations with Scripture

A newsletter dedicated to the interpretation of Scripture and the Sunday readings

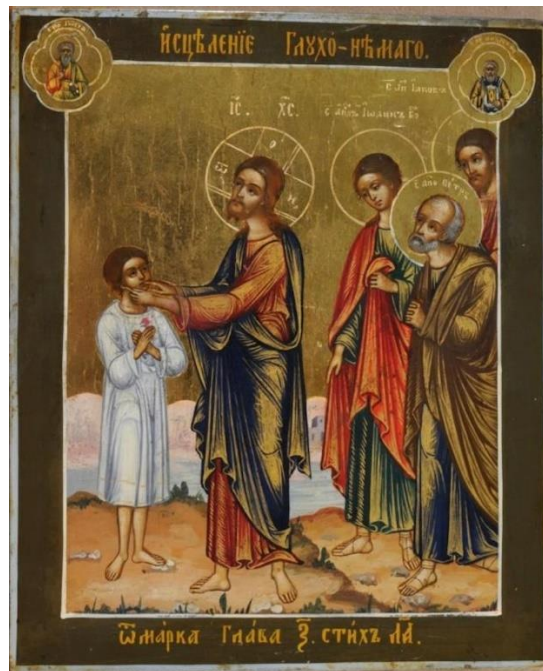
~ Scott M. Lewis, S.J.

ISSUE 6
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Breaking Open the Word of God

Sunday Reflections

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – September 8, 2024
(Year B) Isaiah 35:4-7; Psalm 146; James 2:1-5; Mark 7:31-37



*The healing of the deaf-mute ~ Russian icon, 1908
Radischev State Art Museum, Saratov, Russia*

“Be strong, do not fear. Here is your God.” For whom were these words intended? For the contemporaries of Isaiah to be sure, but also for every human being on this planet.

So many of our troubles stem from fear and the loss of hope and strength that accompanies it. The words may have seemed hollow to those who first heard

them, for their world was falling apart.

Judah was surrounded by enemies and devastation, and the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile were approaching. But the vision is an experience of virtual reality. People were encouraged to share God’s vision for the future and begin to live as if it were already present.

The vision contains a variety of images that speak of life, wholeness and happiness: the lame leap like deer; the eyes of the blind see; and the mute sing for joy. Fresh water flows in the desert, quenching the thirst of the people.

Only life, light and wholeness flow from God. The negative experiences of the people — then and now — are a human responsibility. The vision encouraged people to walk through their suffering with determination and firm faith, confident that God was with them.

Throughout Scripture, the first words from the mouths of angels and divine emissaries were, “Do not be afraid.” And for good reason — fear is a devastator and destroyer. It clouds our spiritual senses, shakes our faith and damages our relationship with God and with other people.

Fear is at the root of much of the world’s violence, intolerance and injustice. Like the people in the sixth century BC, we are faced with many fearful things. Wars and rumours of wars, environmental disasters, pandemics and the continual social and cultural turmoil all conspire to generate fear, hopelessness and a sense that our world is collapsing.

It is not a time to retreat behind walls and barriers or lash out at people and groups. It is a time to be strong, remembering that God is with us and that God is about life, wholeness and joy.

In God there is no darkness, only light and love. With this as our inner focus and affirmation, we can resolutely meet whatever challenges come our way.

Money and power speak loudly, and James reminds us not to be taken in. He paints a rather ugly picture of community members fawning on the wealthy and well-dressed, and treating the poor with indifference or contempt.

God plays no favourites and makes no distinctions between people based on

wealth, poverty, race, gender, religion or life circumstances — and neither should we. When we fall into that trap, we have taken several steps away from God.

We imitate God and manifest God’s love to the world when we are welcoming and kind to all, regardless of outward appearances or labels. The image of God resides in the inner recesses of every human heart and soul, and that is what we must cherish and welcome.

The Gospel story of the man who was deaf and mute is one of the very few instances where Jesus took the recipient of healing aside in private. He also placed His fingers in the man’s ears and touched his tongue with spittle.

Usually, a mere word from Jesus was sufficient, but here He used a more “hands-on” approach. The uttered Aramaic word “*ephphatha*” — be opened — completed the healing.

The man’s hearing and speech were restored. He was gifted with the life and wholeness that come from God, and this represents God’s desire for all people.

Jesus made a futile attempt to put a gag order on the man, admonishing him to tell no one. Of course, he immediately told everyone in sight, enhancing the reputation of Jesus, but possibly hindering his mission.

The miracles of Jesus were not intended to dazzle the crowd or increase his status, but to reveal the nature of God and to give hope. People were definitely impressed and could find no fault with him. Fault-finding would come later, when Jesus challenged human ways of thinking and acting.

In order to enter this world of life and wholeness to which God invites us, we need to change many things. The opening of the mouth, ears and eyes means more than the physical — it reflects the rebirth of our spiritual senses and our awareness.

Sign of Divinity – the Mandorla



Anastasis, 14th century fresco – Church of the Holy Savior, Khorā, Istanbul

Notice the almond-shaped light surrounding Jesus. In fact, mandorla comes from the Italian word for almond. It signifies divine energy, holiness, and in the case of Jesus, divinity.

Its roots are in the East – there are similar depictions of Buddha and various saints. In the Christian context, it became widely used in the 5th and 6th centuries AD to counter Arian claims that Jesus was less than God

and not consubstantial with the Father.

It was also associated with the account of the Transfiguration in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In the Middle Ages, the Virgin Mary began to be depicted in similar ways, reflecting her increasingly exalted status among Christians

The mandorla – as well as halos – faded from use during the Renaissance due to the shift towards naturalism in artistic expression.

Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross - September 14



*The Crucifixion ~ Fra Angelico (1305-1455)
Tempera on wood – c. 1420-1423*

The Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross celebrates three different events. First, St. Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, discovered the True Cross on this date. She is also said to have found those of the two thieves executed with Jesus.

It strains credulity to insist that she found the True Cross after three centuries, and was able to identify it among so many others. She was liberal with monetary rewards, and the local populace was more than willing to accommodate her wishes.

The feast also celebrates the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre that was built on the site of Calvary by Constantine. Finally, it commemorates the return of the True Cross to Jerusalem in 629 AD. It had been captured by Persian forces during the sack of 614 AD. But most of all, it gives grateful thanks for the life-giving power of the cross and for the salvation that is gifted to us through Christ's loving and generous sacrifice.