

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B



FIRST READING
Isaiah 50:5–9

PSALM
Psalm 116:1–6, 8–9

SECOND READING
James 2:14–18

GOSPEL
Mark 8:27–35

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PRAYER

Psalm 116:1–6, 8–9

I love the LORD, because he has heard
my voice and my supplications.
Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him
as long as I live.
The snares of death
encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish.
Then I called on the name of the LORD:
“O LORD, I pray, save my life!”
Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
our God is merciful.
The LORD protects the simple;
when I was brought low, he saved me.
For you have delivered
my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling.
I walk before the LORD
in the land of the living.

READING THE WORD

First Reading Isaiah 50:5–9

The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward.
I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those
who pulled out the beard;

I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.
The Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that
I shall not be put to shame;
he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
It is the Lord God who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
All of them
will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.

Second Reading James 2:14–18

What good is it, my brothers and
sisters, if you say you have faith
but do not have works? Can faith
save you? If a brother or sister is
naked and lacks daily food, and
one of you says to them, “Go in
peace; keep warm and eat your
fill,” and yet you do not supply
their bodily needs, what is the
good of that? So faith by itself, if
it has no works, is dead.
But someone will say, “You have
faith and I have works.” Show me
your faith apart from your works,
and I by my works will show you
my faith.

Gospel

Mark 8:27–35

Jesus went on with his disciples to
the villages of Caesarea Philippi;
and on the way he asked his dis-
ciples, “Who do people say that
I am?” And they answered him,
“John the Baptist; and others, Eli-
jah; and still others, one of the
prophets.” He asked them, “But
who do you say that I am?” Peter
answered him, “You are the Mess-
iah.” And he sternly ordered them
not to tell anyone about him.
Then he began to teach them that
the Son of Man must undergo
great suffering, and be rejected by
the elders, the chief priests, and
the scribes, and be killed, and af-
ter three days rise again. He said
all this quite openly. And Peter
took him aside and began to re-
buke him. But turning and look-
ing at his disciples, he rebuked
Peter and said, “Get behind me,
Satan! For you are setting your
mind not on divine things but on
human things.”
He called the crowd with his dis-
ciples, and said to them, “If any
want to become my followers, let
them deny themselves and take
up their cross and follow me. For
those who want to save their life
will lose it, and those who lose
their life for my sake, and for the
sake of the gospel, will save it.

HEARING THE WORD

“Making the Right Commitment”

Frequently, believers have to choose between various commitments. However, making decisions regarding truly significant and all involving commitments, is not a matter of a simple selection of a most convenient option, but a decision that reflects the person's faith and relationship with Christ.

The first reading features the third of the four songs of the “servant” found in the book of Isaiah. This song begins in Isaiah 50:4, with the words, “the Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with the word. Morning by morning he awakens - awakens my ear to listen as those who are taught”. In this song, the servant is someone who has been taught by God and willingly received this instruction. However, he also faced oppression and persecution. He was struck on the back, his beard was pulled out, he was insulted and spat upon. While the reason for this suffering remains hidden, we might justifiably assume that he suffered because of his adherence to the teaching he had received. Still, the servant did not abandon his commitment, but faced his opponents with courage and determination. His trust and dependence on God, together

with the experience of God's presence, gave him strength to persevere. Since God is on his side, the adversaries are powerless. In the end, the servant will prevail, while the opponents will “wear out like a garment”.

It is thought that Isaiah spoke of this suffering servant in the context of internal divisions between various Jewish groups, who had recently returned from the Babylonian exile, and who attempted to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. These groups had different ideas about life in this new, postexilic era, when they no longer had their own king and political autonomy. Some argued for close collaboration with the ruling Persians, and advocated close ties with their pagan neighbours. Choosing this option meant undermining the identity of the Israelites as God's people, and endangering their distinct way of life. Others preferred the path of strict separation and resistance to foreign influences. The servant in our passage was likely to have been a leader or a teacher who stood for the second option and advocated strict adherence to God, and to God's law in which he was schooled. The phrase, “I was not rebellious”, reveals that he did not join the party of those who rebelled against God and God's ways. Such uncompromising stand brought him ridicule and persecution. This teacher chose to uphold his commit-

ment to God and God's law, despite the heavy price he had to pay.

Some Christians misunderstood Paul's teaching on faith found at Galatians 2:16, “we know that the person is made the righteous not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ”. These misguided believers thought that faith meant a set of ideas that needed to be held as true in a person's head. Thus, if faith was only a set of doctrines to be believed, there was no need to do anything else about it. This was a misreading of Paul who was speaking of “works of the law”, meaning the continuing practice of such Jewish customs as circumcision, dietary laws, purity laws and observance of the Jewish feasts, among others. Paul never denied that faith must express itself in practical ways, particularly through love (cf. Gal 5:6). James clarifies any misunderstanding insisting on practical faith; true faith is reflected in deeds. James does not deny that faith alone is sufficient for salvation. However, how can one tell if faith is truly present? James states that true faith can be distinguished from imagined faith by looking at the person's behaviour. There is no such thing as an unexpressed faith. Faith without corresponding actions is an illusion. James provides a single example of the works of faith - concern for the underprivileged. If a person does not sustain

a fellow Christian in need, then their faith is an illusion. True faith, the faith that saves, is a matter of commitment to Jesus in the heart and committing the body to faithful service.

The gospel passage, commonly known as the “the confession of Peter”, describes a turning point in Jesus’ life. Prior to this event Jesus was primarily concerned with casting out demons, healing the sick, and teaching his disciples. However, these good and noble acts were not the chief reason for his coming into the world. Seeing Jesus’ deeds, the people identified him as one of the prophets, someone equal to John the Baptist or Elijah. By asking “who do people say that I am?”, and then, “who do you say that I am?”, Jesus indicated that time has come to reveal his true identity and mission. When Peter correctly called him “the Messiah”, Jesus understood that the time to reveal his definitive purpose has come. For the first time, he began to speak of the true goal of his mission – suffering, rejection, death and resurrection. Jesus’ frank and open acknowledgment that cruel death lies ahead, must have been difficult even for Jesus, who, after all, was a real human being. It also implied that Jesus had to agree and commit himself to the terrifying prospect of crucifixion. While confidence in the resurrection certainly gave him strength, as a human being he still must have been afraid of the fu-

ture to which he committed himself.

Peter rejected Jesus’ decision. He had other ideas about Jesus’ purpose, and sought to turn Jesus away from the chosen path. Jesus called him “Satan”, because, by trying to change Jesus’ mind, Peter was standing in the way of God’s plans. Jesus also indicated that those who wish to be his disciples must, like him, embrace the path of suffering. It is only through commitment, to the path which Jesus himself walked, that a person can find salvation. Jesus did not seek death, but he understood that overcoming death by embracing it is the only way to life. For this reason, he came into the world and committed himself to the project of salvation, even though it meant walking the path of suffering.

The readings of this Sunday emphasize the need for choosing the right commitments. At the time of Isaiah, many who returned from the exile sought to better their lives by committing themselves to ways of life contrary to God’s law. In the early Church there were many who sought salvation through faith, without committing themselves fully to what faith required. Correcting these notions, James teaches that unexpressed faith is an illusion. Jesus, was fully aware of what his mission in the world involved. Still he must have found the prospect of suffering frightening. Despite this,

Jesus committed himself to carry out his mission as the suffering Messiah. He remained true to his purpose showing an unre-served commitment to the project of human salvation. Those who, like Jesus and Isaiah’s servant, correctly choose and live out their faith commitment, can confidently say with the Psalmist, “I walk before the Lord in the land of the living.”

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

This Sunday’s readings invite us to reflect on the theme of right commitments. Life is full of choices. We constantly face a web of options, voices, enticements, allurements, that swing us left and right. Amid these, a believer must have a firm ground, and stand by the choice he or she has made. The readings invite us to examine critically our choices towards making the right commitment in the end.

The good news today is the assurance that the Lord God is at our side as we make our faith commitments. The first reading shows the suffering servant having confidence in God’s presence despite the oppression and persecution he was going through. God gives him the strength to stand firm and persevere. The servant’s perseverance and commitment saw him rise above his opponents. He chose to stand by God’s

teaching, and his commitment dispelled the fear of running away. He was assured of God's protection. He paid the price for his commitment, but the reward was much greater. God is ever present in our daily lives as we struggle to discern between the voices that sway us. We need to call upon God's name whenever we are tossed by the storms of life. He will enlighten us to make the right decisions in our faith.

Today's readings also invite us to demonstrate of our faith commitments through our actions. The second reading emphasizes that our faith must be visible through deeds. Faith is life, and life is lived in relationship with others. Our behaviour, actions and thoughts communicate our faith. Each day we encounter people of different walks of life - the hungry, the less privileged, the homeless, and the needy of all kinds. What choices do I make in front of these individuals? Do I recognize them, do I feel concerned even in my "limitedness", do I go an extra mile to recognize them as my brothers and sisters and thus share fellowship with them? True faith animates us to be at the service of others through our deeds.

The gospel presents to us a turning point in Jesus' life. Faced with choices, Jesus committed himself wholeheartedly to fulfilling his mission irrespective of impending suffering. Jesus invites us to

examine our life, and make a decisive commitment to him and his ways. As we contemplate this commitment, let us examine ourselves, especially thinking about what makes us hesitate and waver. It could be those we call our friends, just like Peter who attempted to stop Jesus. It could be fear of the consequences that may come with the new path. The first reading assures us of God's presence. We are invited to be resolute in carrying our crosses, irrespective of the hurdles we may encounter, with the help of the Lord, who hears our voice and our applications.

PROVERB

*“He
who chases
two gazelles,
loses
them both.”*

ACTION

Self-examination:

How have I demonstrated my faith? Is my faith experienced by others? What are the most important commitments in my life? Are they in line with my faith?

Response to God:

I will pray for the grace to make right commitments in my faith. I will ask God to give me the courage to pick up my cross and follow him.

Response to your World:

In the course of this week, I will reflect on how to live my faith in relation to others. I will assist three needy people I meet this week, in order to show my concern for them.

As a group, we will reflect on the commitments that guide our activities. Is there anything more or different we can do to demonstrate our faith commitments?

PRAYER

*Grant us O Lord, we pray,
the grace to discern
and make right commitments
in our journey of faith.
Keep us
under the shadow of your wings
and never let us waver.
Let your grace abide with us
as we carry our crosses,
and commit ourselves to Christ.
We ask this
through our Lord Jesus Christ
your son who lives and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit
one God forever and ever.
Amen.*