**Homily for the 23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B**

**September 5, 2021**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Isaiah 35:4-7a (Be strong, fear not! Here is your God.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 146 (Praise the Lord, my soul!)*

*Second Reading: James 2:1-5 (Show no partiality among the community of the faithful.)*

*Gospel: Mark 7:31-37 (Jesus heals a deaf man in Gentile territory.)*

Today the Prophet Isaiah offers words of comfort to his fellow citizens in Jerusalem, who are very frightened by the violence and suffering that they have seen in their neighbors to the North. The Assyrian army has already conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Many of the Jews living there have scattered to the four winds, if they were fortunate enough to avoid being killed or taken away as slaves. Now the Assyrians are continuing southward, capturing one fortified city after another, relentlessly working their way toward the big prize of Jerusalem. In the face of this existential threat, which could mark the end of the Jewish people, Isaiah proclaims, “Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, he comes with vindication; with divine recompense he comes to save you.”

In one sense, Isaiah’s prophecy was fulfilled in his own time. Though the Assyrian army laid siege to Jerusalem, God would not permit them to conquer it. The soldiers eventually turned back and went home, without ever breaching the city’s walls. In another sense, though, Isaiah was speaking not about God saving just this one city from an invading army in the present day, but God sending a Savior to redeem *all* of his people at some future time. Nobody knew when the Messiah would come, but they knew the dramatic and awe-inspiring signs that would reveal his presence: “Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf will be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing.”

The Jewish people eagerly looked forward to the day when these wondrous signs would appear in the land of Israel and the Lord’s Anointed One would, at last, make himself known. Sure enough, when Jesus began his public ministry of preaching and teaching, the very miracles that Isaiah had predicted accompanied him. But, surprisingly, they occurred among the Gentiles, as well as the Jews. In today’s gospel, Jesus is traveling extensively through *Gentile* territory. He starts out in Tyre, on the Mediterranean coast, just north of Israel. Then he goes farther north along the coast to Sidon, another major port city. Then he heads inland, swinging around to the Southeast, into the Decapolis, a group of ten cities to the east of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus and his disciples may have encountered some Jewish communities on this trip, but they surely would have been surrounded by Gentiles at all times. Yet, at the coming of Jesus, the ears of a deaf man are opened, and his tongue is loosed, permitting him to speak plainly, without an impediment. This was a very clear sign that the Good News of the Kingdom was meant for Gentiles, as well as Jews.

Even more remarkable than Jesus bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles was the fact that they heard and proclaimed it. This one particular deaf man was cured of his affliction, but look at what happens to the rest of the community in which he lives. No matter how hard Jesus tries to keep them quiet, the witnesses to these events are intent on spreading the news about Jesus far and wide. They have heard the Good News, and they have been empowered to proclaim it. In other words, *their ears* have been opened, too, and *their tongues* have been loosed. Jesus cured one person, but it seems that he made disciples out of the whole lot of them. Isaiah’s prophecy was being fulfilled – not just for one, but for all.

The hope-filled words of the Prophet Isaiah are needed as much in our own time as they were in ancient Israel, and the Gentile regions surrounding Israel. Our own ears need to be opened to hear the Word of the Lord, and our own tongues need to be freed to proclaim his message to the world. Too often, the Lord’s voice gets drowned out by the noise around us. There are so many concerns which demand our attention, many of them quite trivial in comparison to the Gospel. And there is an incredible amount of dissonance and disinformation, too. In the old days, before social media, we had to learn how to filter out political spin and propaganda in order to arrive at the truth. Now, those rather tame attempts at bending the truth have been replaced by wild conspiracy theories and outright lies. The more outrageous the lies, the more they get repeated on social media, and the more people come to believe them. I continue to be astonished by seemingly intelligent people who have been deluded into believing absurd and demonstrably false ideas. When questioned how they came to hold such obviously false beliefs, they will often say with exasperation, “I hear so many contradictory things that I just don’t know what to believe anymore.” What they’re really admitting is that they have lost their ability to discern the truth. And that is a *very* dangerous affliction – far more dangerous than being blind or deaf, but firmly rooted in the truth. If we cannot distinguish between truth and falsehood in mundane matters like vaccines and masks and elections, then we will have no hope of discerning what is of God and what is opposed to God. Jesus looked up to heaven and groaned as he ministered to the deaf-mute. I’ve done the same thing when confronted by a person spouting utter nonsense about COVID-19. Once people close their ears to the truth, it’s really hard to open them up again.

There is always hope, however. God continues to come to his people with “vindication and divine recompense” to save us. His healing grace touches all people who come to him, bringing us new life and new freedom. He opens our ears to hear his Word and to discern the truth. He frees our tongues to proclaim the faith which gives direction and purpose to our lives. He strengthens us to overcome our weakness and fear and to stand up for what we believe. And, he opens our eyes to see the marvels that he is doing in the world and within each one of us. The prophetic signs are all here, right now. The Lord is in our midst, and he “does all things well,” as the people of the Decapolis joyfully proclaimed. And so, even as we look with sadness at the sorry state of our world, we can still hear the voice of the Prophet crying out, “Be strong, fear not! Here is your God.” He comes with power and mercy, with justice and compassion. He comes not to end the world or to fix all of its problems, but to strengthen us, his people, in the midst of those problems. He gives us hope and courage to carry on.