

## Liturgy of the Word, December 6, 2021

It would be hard to imagine a more dramatic - and perhaps more awkward - scene than that of today's gospel. Desperate friends trying to get through a crowd to bring a paralyzed man to Jesus. Finding no way in but up, they break through the roof and lower their friend into the house, compelled by both their faith and their compassion

But among the crowd, it seems there are several Jesus' more critical observers, Pharisees and lawyers who are gathering even from the surrounding villages. This is the first time they are mentioned in Luke's gospel.

What were they expecting? Was it a miracle or was it perhaps a mis-step – something by which they might challenge Jesus or perhaps 'catch him out'?

Jesus does not disappoint on either score.

First there is a misstep. Jesus says: 'Your sins are forgiven'. Every good Jew knew that only God can forgive sins. Yet here is Jesus proclaiming such forgiveness, 'enacting' if you will, the mercy of God. (The philosopher Hannah Arndt writing on the Human condition said forgiveness was Christianity's contribution to the world.)

But there was also the miracle, the healing of the paralyzed man who with every burden now lifted, shouldered his own mat, and went out restored - glorifying God.

The crowd, we are told, was amazed and awed, and they, too, glorified God for having seen 'strange' 'incredible' things today.

But the Pharisees, it seems, were not impressed, for we read in the next chapter of Luke, that when Jesus, in disregard of the Sabbath, cured the man with the withered hand, they were 'filled with fury'.

Often in our prayer we can situate ourselves in the story. Where might it be in this gospel?

Are we the devoted friends? Are we the one who is paralyzed? Are we the curious crowd? Are we the cynical onlookers? Or perhaps we are the very one who grants forgiveness and healing. At various points in our lives, we may have played every role.

But the first reading today of Isaiah's beautiful vision of restoration after the fall of Judah can also present us with some points of entry or identification. He speaks of weak hands, feeble knees, blind eyes, stopped ears, a muted voice.

Perhaps we have known some of these as well. But the promise here is restoration, even joy. It is a promise that Jesus himself fulfils. Our infirmities will be carried, our earth restored. A way of holiness will be opened to us.

Peter Maurin, who was a friend and teacher of Dorothy Day, and with her established the Catholic Worker House, said that the task at hand was to 'make it easier for people to be good'.

This vision of Isaiah points to a world where it is easier for people to be good. Water will flow in the desert, flowers will bloom in the wasteland, and no harm will come to all God's holy ones.

We are far from such a world. Perhaps we have turned a point in our awareness of how we have harmed the planet, but there are still jackals (ravenous beasts) in the wilderness, jackals of abuse, poverty, hunger, corruption, greed, racism, violence, and war. The vision of Isaiah, of Peter Maurin, of Jesus have yet to be fulfilled.

Yet in this season of waiting and longing, we are encouraged to persist in faithful hope, as did the friends who lowered the man through the roof, and as Isaiah envisioned in a flourishing world. The beautiful Taize chant urges us: 'Wait for the Lord, his day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart.'