

[Spirituality](#)
[Scripture for Life](#)

by By Mary M. McGlone, CSJ

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

September 9, 2018

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

The Letter of James stands out in Christian literature for its relentless insistence on justice in action as the sign of Christian faith. The vignette James gives us today may be the Christian Scripture's first condemnation of "profiling." James was writing to a community that apparently separated the ins from the outs by their dress, a detail even less revealing about a person than their ancestry, height, weight or color of skin. (Think about that in light of the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve tried to create fashion from fig leaves, they were inventing clothes to hide rather than express who they really were!)

James told his community a story of two visitors to a religious gathering. One is all but dripping with gold, while the other, like Pig Pen of the "Peanuts" cartoon, radiates what we might call a very earthy aura and aroma. The group's reaction is just what would be expected — unless they purported to be Christians.

James reproaches his community for acting like the people in the story he made up. He accuses them of acting like bribable judges by making distinctions among the members of their congregation. James calls them on the carpet for betraying God's priorities. Even as James tells the community to make no distinctions, he points out that God has consistently chosen the poor to be rich in faith.

This Gospel teaching is especially challenging to economically comfortable communities of faith. Since 1968, the bishops of Latin America have been outspoken in their prophetic demands that the church recognize the unique role the poor play in Christianity. In 2007, the bishops published a document edited under the leadership of future Pope Francis that summarized their international meeting at Aparecida, Brazil. The bishops reminded the church that we meet Christ particularly in the poor and that the poor have a special claim on our commitment. They went on to say that the church's faithfulness to Christ is at stake in our recognition of Christ in the poor. They summarize the prophetic position of the poor by saying, "Our very adherence to Jesus Christ ... makes us friends of the poor and unites us to their fate." (Document of Aparecida #257).

With that in mind, let's imagine James' fictional community as they look over their two unexpected guests. What would they have said if one of their members jumped up, rushed past Goldfingers and the religious leaders to embrace the shabby guest cheerfully shouting, "Dusty! We have been waiting so long for you! You have so much to teach us! Come up to the ambo so you can get started." Can't you imagine a curmudgeon stage-whispering, "If she knew he was coming, why didn't she get him a bath before he showed up?"

James' insistence on the importance of the poor throws a unique light on the Gospel and the selection from Isaiah we hear today. Isaiah proclaims that God's activity among us gives sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf and leads the lame to dance. (Note: There's nothing about bathing or dressing well.) How likely is it that we who dress decently are the blind and deaf and lame to whom Isaiah refers?

We can appreciate today's Gospel story — the miracle of healing the deaf man — as a marvel of Jesus' power and leave it at that. On the other hand, we might ask where we fit in this story. Mark tells us that some unnamed people brought the deaf man to Jesus. Who in our society or world might be trying to lead us to a miracle of more acute hearing?

As we discern how to address societal needs, we can look to Pope Francis and church teaching through the ages. From the time that Jesus looked at his disciples and said, "Blessed are you poor" to the present time, Christianity has taught that the poor and those who work for justice represent the reign of God among us. The people moving the ecological efforts throughout the world are trying to open our ears to the cry of the earth. In our country, pro-life activists, the proponents of Black Lives Matter, the Me Too movement and the high school disarmament activists would say they are trying to bring our society to its senses. Perhaps, God is working through them somehow to move us to hear what our faith demands in today's world.

ISAIAH 35:4-7a

This selection from Isaiah presents an unalloyed message of reassurance, and each part of it deserves meditation. The first encouragement we hear is, "Fear not!" a phrase that is repeated often in Scripture. Just for starters, we might look at how much television advertising plays on our fears: fear of illness and death; fear of financial problems; fear of being attacked in some way or robbed; fear of being unpopular, blemished or even incontinent. All of those can be summed up as fear of our own limitations or rejection by ourselves, others or God. Isaiah explains that God responds to all these fears just like parents who run when they hear their child crying. God says, "I am here." Do we believe that is true? Is it enough for us?

As this passage continues, Isaiah's message moves beyond that simple assurance and indicates how to recognize God's saving activities. When we hear that God is coming with vindication and divine recompense, small hearts may be stirred to hope for vengeance, for a payback to all who cause them suffering. But that is not the sort of salvation God is proclaiming.

Isaiah tells us to seek divine recompense in the perfecting of creation, not punishment. This passage explains that salvation is happening when the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf are opened, when those whose knees were knocking stand up and leap like stags. Isaiah even goes so far as to say that the earth itself will come to new life as the deserts are watered and cooled.

But, we should be cautioned: This is salvation with a hook. Not only will God be here for us, but God's way of being here calls us to become more like God. Salvation involves having our eyes and ears, and thus our hearts, opened to God's plan for creation. God's vindication on behalf of those who have suffered is to open the eyes of their oppressors, to lead them to conversion. In order to desire this sort of salvation, we have to cultivate a heart like the heart of God.

PSALMS 146:6-7, 8-9, 9-10

The Lectionary tells us that instead of repeating "Praise the Lord," we can use the word "Alleluia" as the refrain to our psalm. Alleluia is simply a word that means "praise the Lord." This psalm opens the final section of the psalter in which each psalm begins with this same joyful cry of praise. In the light of this week's Liturgy of the Word, we might try to be particularly mindful of God's work among us as we pray this psalm. Then we can pray with intentional thanksgiving for how God remains involved in human history.

Our first verse refers to God as the God of Jacob. That is not a title, but a reminder of God's personal involvement with the people of Israel whose heirs we are. That idea is carried forth in the second part of that line: We say that God keeps faith forever because that has been our experience, not simply our dogma.

From there, our psalm moves into descriptions of God's priorities: justice for the oppressed; food for the hungry; freedom for the captive; sight for the blind; hearing for the deaf; and protection for the stranger, widow and orphan. Then, just in case we still missed the message, the psalmist comes at it from another angle and warns us that God thwarts the way of the wicked. We could hardly have a clearer description of what the bishops of Latin America have identified as Christianity's distinctive "preferential option for the poor" (Aparecida #257).

After hearing last week's Gospel in which Jesus warned us about the hypocrisy of praise that comes from our lips but has no roots in our soul, we should consider this psalm with care before blithely singing it. As it refers to our reading from

Isaiah and orients us to today's Gospel, this psalm challenges us to ask if we truly want our eyes and ears to be opened to God's truth. Can we respond to each of these verses with an "Alleluia" that comes from the depths of our soul and a commitment to further God's plan in our time and place?

JAMES 2:1-5

Scholars generally attribute the Letter of James to the James who was described as the brother of the Lord who, although he was not an apostle, was a leader of the early church in Jerusalem. Whether he was the author or it came from another, this letter is a treasure of early Christian wisdom and moral reasoning. Today's selection begins to hone in on community relationships involving the wealthy and the poor.

To begin the discussion, James enjoins his community to "show no partiality" in their treatment of others. In saying that, James uses a word that is found only three other times in the Christian Scriptures (Romans 2:11, Ephesians 6:9, Colossians 3:25). The writers of these letters all seem to be referring to Deuteronomy 10:17-18, which describes God as one who "has no favorites [and] accepts no bribes," and at the same time "executes justice for the orphan and the widow and loves the resident alien."

James offers delightfully vivid descriptions of the sort of behavior the community should avoid. Our translation doesn't do justice to James' portrayals of the two people who drop in on a Christian community. The literal description of the wealthy one is of a "golden fingered" man with "shining clothing." But of the poor person, literally one who crouches or cringes like a beggar, the author says only that his clothing is filthy. Upon their arrival, the community blunders stupendously. Without blinking an eye, they sin in thought, word and deed by judging, speaking and showing each visitor to his rightful place, determined solely on the quality of his appearance.

Having presented this semi-fictional scenario, James moves from story mode to indictment. He equates the community with corrupt judges and accuses them: "Have you not made distinctions among yourselves?"

For James, an attitude of impartiality is a requirement for Christians, an essential characteristic of people who "adhere to the faith" in Jesus Christ. He reminds them that God's impartiality actually bends toward the poor, giving them the grace of being rich in faith.

At the very least, this selection from James reminds us that faith in Jesus calls us to live by standards that are rarely appreciated by the culture around us. James would have us view ostentatious wealth with evangelical suspicion and approach the simple and impoverished members of the community with the reverence and attention we give our greatest teachers.

MARK 7:31-37

As this Gospel scene opens, Jesus has returned to the area where he had healed a man possessed by a "legion" of demons only to have those demons escape to occupy nearby pigs, sending the whole herd hurtling over a cliff (Mark 5:17). Now, the people who then begged Jesus to leave their territory bring him a man who is deaf and beg Jesus to heal him.

Mark tells us that Jesus took the deaf man aside, away from the crowd. The word for taking him aside (apo- lambano) is usually translated as "receive" rather than "take," giving us the impression that by going apart, Jesus was receiving the man into his private company for an encounter more personal than what can happen in the midst of a crowd. Jesus then performed the healing by putting his fingers in the man's ears and placing his own spittle on his tongue.

Those healing gestures were typical in Jesus' cultural milieu. Nevertheless, the willingness to touch an infirm person was a particular sign of solidarity and, even though some people in Jesus' day considered spittle as a healing agent, sharing his saliva with the man was a gesture of special intimacy. After performing those gestures, Jesus assumed a posture of prayer. He then spoke as God had spoken at the creation; just as light appeared at God's command, when Jesus said "Ephphatha!" the man's ears were opened and he could speak clearly.

The healing so astounded the crowds that they could not contain their desire to spread the word about it. Gentile or Jew, we do not know, but the popular verdict was, "He has done all things well. He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." (Obviously, the healing was much more acceptable behavior than launching two thousand pigs into the abyss!)

Jesus' healing ministry always went beyond a simple cure. Everyone freed from an infirmity remains subject to other physical problems and ultimately to death. Jesus' healings did not eliminate human mortality, but they were oriented to the whole person, not just a health condition. Opening the ears of the deaf brought about a transformation on both the human and the theological level. On the human level, dialog, hearing and speaking, characterize and differentiate people from the animals and other parts of creation. When we listen, we freely allow something of the very being of another to enter into us. Speech is one of our primary ways of communing with others. Theologically, we understand God's communication with human beings as word and with the Word made Flesh. Opening the deaf man's ears enriched his ability to relate to others. On the theological level, the healing was symbolic of allowing the word of God to communicate with his heart.

Mark is careful to let us know that the man's speech became clear only after his ears were opened. On both the natural and the theological levels, hearing must precede speech. Mark drives home that idea in what is usually called the messianic secret. Jesus ordered the witnesses not to tell anyone, but "the more he ordered them not to, the more they proclaimed it." In explaining this, Mark is highlighting two dimensions of the same reality. On a superficial level, the people who witnessed the healing refused to hear/obey Jesus' admonition to keep silent: They felt qualified to speak about him even though he asked them not to do so. On a more profound level, Jesus' reason for the prohibition was that they hadn't truly heard/understood his message. Like the deaf man with a speech impediment, their proclamation could not be clear because their understanding remained shallow. Jesus repeated this prohibition to the disciples at the Transfiguration (Mark 9:9) and at other moments for the very same reason: Those who were amazed at him didn't yet really understand who he was. (Remember that in Mark 1:24, a demon was the first to proclaim that Jesus was the Holy One of God.) Taken together, this week's readings remind us of how much we have to learn and how cautious we should be in making judgments. The first reading and the Gospel promise that God will open our ears if we ask. The second reading advises us that God's word will often come from what we consider the least likely sources. In some ways, these readings are a prelude to what will come next week. For now, we need to remember that salvation comes with a hook: The more we want from God, the more like God we are called to become.

Planning: 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

The readings call our attention to God's healing power. Isaiah foretold: "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing." Jesus fulfills that prophecy in the Gospels, including the man with hearing and speech problems.

The church continues that healing ministry in various ways, but the primary channel of that ministry is the anointing of the sick. It has been more than 45 years since the revision of this sacrament was issued. That's more than two generations, yet we still have many Catholics who do not understand this sacrament or know when to ask for it. Though many of them don't come to church and only call when someone is on their deathbed to ask for the "last rites," there are many in our pews who still need sacramental catechesis regarding the anointing of the sick.

This would be a good weekend to preach and teach about the anointing and about Viaticum, the proper sacrament to request when death approaches. Homilists and planners should work together to provide a comprehensive catechesis to the parish, perhaps supplementing homilies with bulletin inserts or posters at the entrances or small cards to take home with guidelines for requesting each sacrament. If you are unsure of those guidelines, read the introduction to the book, *Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum* or contact your diocesan worship office to seek a resource you can use.

A strong way of catechizing on anointing, of course, is celebrating the sacrament within Sunday Mass. That requires prior explanation to the parish about who is the proper subject of the anointing, but the experience of sharing in the sacrament with other parishioners teaches the value of asking for the anointing before the last minute. Is this a good weekend for your parish to celebrate the sacrament at Mass? You may need to spend this weekend preparing the people for a celebration later in the month, but this is still a good opportunity for catechesis on it.

Often, it works best to have the anointing at one or several of the regular weekend Masses, but in some situations, a separate Mass (on Sunday afternoon) might work better if you are transporting homebound parishioners to the church.

This Sunday is also Grandparents Day (in the U.S.), which some may dismiss as just another marketing ploy. Whether it is or not, it's still a good opportunity to acknowledge the role of grandparents in guiding their grandchildren in life and sharing their faith with them. The Book of Blessings does not offer a blessing for grandparents, but Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers has one (pg. 191) that could easily be adapted for use at the end of Masses this weekend.

Prayers: 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

INTRODUCTION

We gather today as the blind person who does not see the suffering in our world. We are the deaf person who does not hear the cries of the poor and the mute who fails to speak up against injustice. We come to Jesus for healing so we may speak out against people and systems that oppress and silence the voices of the least among us.

PENITENTIAL ACT

- Lord Jesus, in your mercy, you are strength for the weak and oppressed: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, in your mercy, you heal the blind, deaf and mute: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, in your mercy, you give love and hope to the broken and lost: Lord, have mercy.

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

Presider We ask God to open our ears and eyes to the needs of our world so we may respond with the awareness and love of Jesus Christ.

Minister We pray for good health and strength for Pope Francis who tirelessly proclaims Jesus' healing love and mercy to the world ... we pray,

- For the health and well-being of all healers: those who heal our physical ailments, those who free our mind from stress and worry, and those who lovingly guide us closer to Christ. Together may we heal our broken world ... we pray,
- For those who have no voice: the poor and marginalized, victims of human trafficking, the unborn and those suffering from all forms of mental illness ... we pray,
- For forgiveness and conversion of mind and heart, for those of us who are spiritually blind to the needs of the poor, for the spiritual deafness that keeps us from hearing the cries of the oppressed, and for the times we have witnessed suffering and failed to act ... we pray,
- For healing and protection for our earth and its natural resources; for an end to all practices that endanger animals and their natural habitats; for compassion for all creatures great and small ... we pray,
- For God's eternal peace and perpetual light to all who have died due to the violence, through drugs, war, poverty, homelessness, lack of clean water and medical services, abortion and suicide ... we pray,

Presider God of mercy, we need your healing. Open our ears, hearts, eyes and mouths to proclaim your greatness. Protect all with no ability to protect themselves. This we ask, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Advertisement

This story appears in the **Cycle B Sunday Resources** feature series. [View the full series.](#)