

## **23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday, Year B: Is 35:4-7, James 2:1-5; Mk 7:31-37**

Barbara Cartland, a prolific writer of popular romance, came into remote contact with royal circles when her daughter Raine's stepdaughter became the Princess of Wales in 1981. When Miss Cartland was interviewed for the BBC radio program "Today", the woman interviewer asked her if she thought that class barrier had been broken down in Great Britain. "Of course, they have, replied Miss Cartland, "or I wouldn't be sitting down and talking to someone like you". This kind of snobbery can be dismissed as harmless stupidity or depending on one's point of view as furthering the class barrier it claims has disappeared. We may smile at this, but we all know that prejudice forms and informs our ways of looking at each other and at the world.

Each of us of us has inherited a mixed bag of beliefs and suspicions, some of which we have grown to discard, others we have adopted and made our own. The prejudice that serve to prop up our sense of superiority, while keeping others in diminishment, are particularly difficult to tear down. We can all decorate our insecurity by regarding as inferior those who are different from us. But if our own sense of worth is maintained at the expense of other people's dignity, what value is it? It is certainly not a Christian value. When it comes to people it is very difficult for us not to make distinctions. We invariable favour some over others. We choose some and not others. A man chooses one woman to be his wife out of several he may have come to know. A woman chooses one man to be her husband. We choose our friends, and some people choose their friends carefully. Parents will favour their own children over other children. It is natural and human for us to make distinctions. In this morning's second reading, James calls on the members of the church not to show favour on the basis of social class, making a fuss of the better off. James is saying that certain forms of favouritism are never acceptable within the community of believers. Everyone is to be treated equally regardless of their social background; in the context of worship there are to be no special seats for the more socially prominent. He In all areas of church life everyone should feel equally valued. This is very much Paul's vision of church as well. In his letter to the Galatians he declares that in virtue of baptism, 'there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.' James spells out that vision of Paul in very practical terms. That second reading from James prompts us to ask if any form of unhealthy favouritism is to be found in our own church, our own parish. Are there people we are not noticing? Are they voices we are not hearing? Are there people who would like to be involved in the life of

the parish but who feel that they are not welcome, that their potential contribution is not valued? I hope not but it is something we all need to keep alert to.

The letter of James claims to be written by the brother of the Lord. If so, then James knew the Lord's mind and heart well and his outlook on things reflects that of his more significant relative. The gospels strongly suggest that Jesus was not partial to people on the basis of social class. Indeed the portrait of Jesus we are given in the gospels suggest that he favoured the vulnerable, the poor, the weak, the defenseless. He was partial to the voiceless and the afflicted. This morning's gospel bears that out. A man who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech was brought to Jesus by his friends. In an oral culture where people were largely illiterate, not to be able to hear or speak properly was an enormous liability. Those who could neither hear nor speak were invisible; they could not be communicated with in any meaningful way and they could not communicate. This man was fortunate to have people who cared enough about him to bring him to Jesus who had a reputation for giving new life to the broken. The personal attention that Jesus goes on to give this man is striking. He takes the man away from the crowd, so that the two of them could be alone. Although the man cannot hear or speak, he can experience the sense of touch, and so Jesus touches the man's ears, putting his finger into them, and touches the man's tongue with his own spittle. Jesus also looked up to heaven, in prayer; it was Jesus' relationship with God that would bring new life to this man. Jesus invests himself in a very personal and tactile way with this man's healing. It is worth noting that this man was a pagan, not a Jew. The Decapolis where the healing story is set was a predominantly pagan region. Jesus favoured the voiceless and the afflicted, whether they were Jew or pagan.

The behaviour of Jesus in the gospel is an even more powerful message. If, as people who have been baptized into Christ, we are to have favourites, they are to be the voiceless, the afflicted, the vulnerable and the weak. The friends of the man in the gospel can be our inspiration in that regard. They brought man to Jesus, and, in so doing, they opened him up to a whole new life, a life that was richer and fuller than he had ever known. They were strength in his weakness. Their voice, their speaking to Jesus on his behalf, led to him coming to have a voice of his own. Even though he could not speak, his friends heard him; they heard the stirrings and longings of his heart, and their attentive listening lead on to him being able to hear for himself. Their attentive listening to him was prior to their speaking on his behalf. If they had not first listened to him, they would not have taken the initiative to speak up for him. Very often, our own sharing in the Lord's life giving work, in

response to our baptismal calling, begins with attentive listening to someone, a listening to the whole person and not just to the words they speak.

Jesus knows that people shrink back under indifference, are wounded by prejudice, are hurt when they are rejected. Prejudice handicaps everyone it touches; it allows fears to wear the garb of social and religious propriety. It is a killer disease that we must not tolerate or allow. Out of Jesus' infinite passion, his love is available for everyone, without any presuppositions or any conditions. He is not disconcerted by the handicapped; neither is he prejudiced against those not of his own race or religion. His own uniqueness is not employed to lord it over others but to be of service to them. In his presence, no one has to conceal or hide his/her handicap, no one has to be isolated in a wordless world, no one has to be rejected because of his being different. Jesus' love opens up new possibilities. For him nothing is settled as such. Prejudice tries to settle everything. Jesus knows that people shrink under indifference and are wounded by prejudice. People are hurt when they are rejected. Prejudice handicaps everyone. It is a killer disease that should be avoided at all costs. It is always good to remember that whoever we meet, God has first loved them.