

THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

Nicky Ing - 19th February 2006

Isaiah 43:18-25; Psalm 41; 2 Corinthians 1:18-22; Mark2:1-12

Our first reading from the book of Isaiah was part of a prophecy to the people of Israel when they were in exile in Babylon. It was a very difficult time in the history of the people. They were painfully aware of all they had lost...they had been taken from their land, the city of Jerusalem was a ruin, and they felt that God had abandoned them. But the prophet Isaiah announces that God is about to reveal his faithfulness to them. God is going to forgive and forget their sins of the past, and will bring them out of exile, through the wilderness, and back to the promised land....This is a new thing that God is about to do, and when it happens, the people will once more sing God's praises. They are encouraged to stop looking back at the past, with all its tragedy and failure...and to look forward with hope to the new and exciting future which is in store for them.

The psalm we read together, is also an affirmation of the faithfulness of God, in good times and in difficult times... God is merciful and brings healing, God brings restoration in times of sickness.....we are encouraged to hope in God and trust only in him. And again, in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, God has shown that his promise is to be trusted...because he sent Jesus, whom he describes as the 'YES' to all God's promises; Jesus, who has given us the Holy Spirit in our hearts, to empower us and strengthen us for doing God's work in our world. All these are such positive, encouraging readings for us, today. But, like the people in exile in those Old Testament times, and like the Corinthian people who were tending to despair, to feel forgotten by God, I think it is very easy for us, too, to fail to see the potential for good in situations. When we experience life as a trial and a struggle, we can become focused on what is negative, and we often fail to see what may be good or promising. Our God did not just create in the past, but is always working creatively amongst us, doing new deeds, bringing new life out of situations that might at first seem hopeless, and opening up new possibilities for the future.

The gospel today also reveals God doing something new....bringing new life into a situation of paralysis and guilt.... Let's have a look at the Gospel story and see what it has to teach us.

Jesus has returned to Capernaum, and the house where he goes, is soon overflowing with people who have come to listen to him; and the entrance to the house is obstructed by the crowd. Four men arrive at the house, carrying their paralysed friend on a stretcher....but the crowd is not likely to move or give way.....so the new arrivals have to think of another way of helping their friend to reach Jesus. They carry him up the outside stairway of the house, make a hole through the layer of wooden beams, brushwood, and earth, no doubt showering everyone inside with pieces of the damaged roof...and then they lower the mat on which their friend is lying. Now we do know that in Jesus' time it was common to see physical illness as a punishment or consequence of sin...and it may

well be that the paralysed man himself believed that his paralysis was due to sin....whatever the situation, Jesus saw that the man needed more than physical healing; he needed spiritual restoration. And because of the persistent faith of the four friends who have brought this man for healing, Jesus pronounces forgiveness to him. And now the trouble begins. The scribes, who are always among the traditional enemies of Jesus, question what he has done....' ***How can this man talk like that? He is blaspheming! Only God can forgive sins!***' so Jesus asks THEM a question...'***which is easier, to say to the paralytic: Your sins are forgiven....or to say: stand up and take your mat and walk?***' The man's healing becomes complete....because Jesus gives him the opportunity to demonstrate the forgiveness and healing he has received. Jesus never treats sick people as passive objects. To this man, he says: '***Stand up, take your mat, and go to your home!***' The paralysed man has been chained to his stretcher by fear...he feels safe on that stretcher....preferring to stay lying down...he is afraid to risk getting up! So Jesus challenges him with his own will and his own strength: '***You can stand up on your own. Just try. You can do it!***' Jesus gives him an awareness of what he can do for himself....so that now he will no longer want to blame others for his illness, and he won't need to look to them for help...but will take responsibility for himself.

And while the scribes saw what was happening as an insult to God, others who watched this recognized this as a miraculous work of God, and they praised God for it.

I wonder what does this story have to say for us today?

- I think we need to be aware that God is always at work in a life-giving way in our lives, whether that is in our personal lives or in our life as the Church community in Hilton. Perhaps we need to be asking for new vision so that we can see more clearly what God is doing, especially when it is not apparent or obvious, and when we tend to see things in a negative way.

- Secondly, I think we are invited to be more than just passive observers of what God is doing. God calls us to share in the work of doing what needs to be done. We too can create openings for God to work in new ways. The four men who brought their friend for healing created an opening in the roof of the house where Jesus was teaching....in this way they made an opening for God to work through Jesus in a new way....and in doing this they also needed to be persistent and resourceful. They knew that if one way didn't work, they would have to try another....and not give up. They also had to do it together...as a team. One man on his own could not have managed to carry their sick friend. We need to notice, too, that they used their team energy not for their own personal gain.....but for someone else's healing. They took responsibility for giving their friend the opportunity to receive the healing he so desperately needed. We too, in the Church, need teamwork. We can offer our particular gifts to each other and learn to recognize and respect the gifts of others too....then God will be able to do many new and exciting things through us.

- Thirdly, the forgiveness of God....restoration of relationship....much more could be said on this whole matter of forgiveness, but the example set by Jesus is vital for us all.

Perhaps we can ask ourselves a couple of questions.....the answers are for each of us to work out in ourselves and with God's help.

Is there something that is blocking me from wholeness in my life? Is there something within me that paralyzes me, inhibits me, or prevents me from offering my gifts in the service of others? Jesus offers each of us the gift of healing and forgiveness....so that we too may have a healing effect on others. We can encourage those who are stressed, or exhausted, or in emotional pain. What is my own capacity for healing? Perhaps we can offer ourselves in new ways to God, today, and this week, and watch for the opportunities God offers us. As we come to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion, may we be made whole and be filled with a tangible sense of God's love, and peace. **Amen.**