

A Look Behind the Scriptures

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time—Cycle B—February 5, 2012



READING I Job 7:1-4, 6-7

Put bluntly, the chief message is: God is God and we are not. As he faces stunning calamities, Job wonders why such evil has befallen him. The old assumptions – that misfortune was God’s punishment for wrongdoing – can’t apply here because Job is clearly a righteous man. In the end, he must accept that human suffering is a mystery and even the noblest cannot demand an explanation from God. But when our pain becomes so great that all we can *do* about it is to *talk* about, we discover that talking *can* make a difference. In the face of great trials, a healthy option is simply to acknowledge how awful the situation is while trusting God will be with us in the darkness and pain. Plumbing the depths of misery is a human quality, and this passage is a marvel of misery – oozing with pain, anxiety, and depression – which Job expresses without embarrassment. Today’s Gospel offsets this reading with images of healing and hope but this passage focuses on the futility of life. For Job, life has become “months of misery” filled with restless nights and days that vanish as quickly as his “hope.” But the Gospel surprises us all the more with the saving works of Christ.

READING II 1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23

Paul acknowledges a compulsion to speak the word of God. The word “obligation,” here suggests more a burden than a privilege. But for Paul, proclamation of the Gospel is pure privilege. When he says “woe to me if I do not preach it,” he’s not fearing divine reprisal, but speaking like an athlete about the need to exercise or a poet about the need to write – they would stop being who they are if they terminated those activities, and Paul would not be Paul if he became mute about the Gospel. His talk of recompense might seem indulgent, but keep in mind that he was criticized by opponents who thought his refusal to accept money for preaching reflected lack of confidence in his own authority. False teachers would soon appear in Corinth who all too eagerly accepted financial support. Paul doesn’t want to be mistaken for someone like that. His goal is simple: do everything in his power to win at least some to Christ. Hence his famous declaration that he became “all things to all people.” For the sake of Christ, he will be “weak” to win over the weak and become a “slave” to win over as many as possible. Paul feels strongly and these are intensely personal issues for him. Paul is not bragging, but persuading skeptics. Preaching the Gospel “willingly” is its own reward, but even if he were unwilling he couldn’t escape the fact that he’s been “entrusted with a stewardship,” a responsibility he simply can’t avoid. Paul’s freedom allows him to *choose* the slavery of willing service. His service to the weak and to all is a sign of great love. Paul is not only good enough to love, he’s smart enough to love, for he knows that service without love offers no “share” in the Gospel’s blessings.

GOSPEL Mark 1:29-39

Mark’s Gospel account is distinctive in its simplicity. He says much with few words and makes the amazing events of the kingdom appear commonplace. This is a very different world from Job’s. Here the sick are healed and demons are expelled. But note that “*all*” who were ill or possessed came to Jesus and the “*whole*” town gathered at his door, yet not all, but “*many*” of the sick and possessed were healed and cleansed. Again, God is God and we can only wonder why some were healed and others not. Yet divine power is manifest clearly, powerfully, almost routinely in Jesus’ ministry. Mark’s time references to “evening” and “sunset” suggest the tired part of a day suddenly made tumultuous by the arrival of the sick and possessed. Then, “early before dawn” the rapt silence of Jesus’ prayer is broken by the disciples’ exclamation. But Jesus is re-energized and sets out resolutely to bring the miraculous abundance of the kingdom to all of Galilee.

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