

My Brothers and Sisters,

In many ways, we are living in a scary world. Older people worry about their retirements, whether they will have enough money to live on. Working adults, underemployed adults, unemployed adults worry about supporting themselves and their families. Students worry about what kind of future they will have when they hear about college graduates unable to find decent jobs. Since 9/11, all of us in the United States live with some fear of terrorism.

Clearly God was thinking of us when he told the Prophet Isaiah: *“Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, he comes with vindication; With divine recompense he comes to save you.”* In this prophecy, God speaks hope and encouragement to all who live in fear by promising to come in power.

The second part of the prophecy describes the signs of God’s coming in power: the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will leap, the mute will sing, and the deserts will come alive and flow with water. In today’s Gospel, Jesus cured a deaf and mute man. When we read the stories of Jesus’ miracles, we need to keep two things in mind. The miracles of Jesus were not random acts of kindness. They were the miracles that had been prophesied as the signs of the coming of God’s kingdom. Second, they not only have a literal meaning but a figurative meaning. In other words, when Jesus opened the eyes of the blind, it also meant that he enabled them to see with eyes of faith. When he cleared the ears of the deaf, it also meant that he enabled them to hear with ears of faith.

According to the Letter to the Hebrews, Jesus came to *“free those who through fear of death had been subject to slavery all their life”* [2:15]. If we put our faith and our hope in Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promise in Isaiah, i.e., if we are willing to entrust our lives and our futures to Jesus, if we are willing to see and hear with eyes and ears of faith, we will be free of fear. In John’s Gospel, Jesus said, *“If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”* [8:31-32]. The bottom line is that faith and hope in Christ free us from fear even in difficult and dangerous times. In times of fear, we need to turn to Jesus in prayer, asking to be delivered from our fears. A close friend of mine once gave me a little plaque which reads, “Prayer does not change things, it changes people and they change things.”

My brothers and sisters, today’s second reading comes from the Letter of St. James. This is one of the Letters to all Christians. In today’s reading, St. James reminds us as individuals and as a community to show no partiality just as God shows no partiality and chooses the *“poor in the world to be rich in faith.”* What causes us to show partiality? I think we all tend to be more comfortable among people like ourselves or, at least, as we perceive ourselves. Second, we often tend to favor those whom society favors: the wealthy, the powerful, and the beautiful. St. James makes the point that since God does not show partiality, we should not show partiality. *“Did not God choose those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him?”*