

My Brothers and Sisters,

The Gospels are filled with stories of Jesus' teaching and his miracles. Through his miracles, Jesus certainly practiced what he preached. He preached love as the only ultimately decisive reality in life, love for God and love for others. He lived that love for God and for others in his own life. He lived that love for others when he cured the deaf man with the speech impediment in today's Gospel.

When we read the miracle stories in the Gospels, we might be tempted to see them simply as random acts of kindness in response to the spontaneous requests of suffering people or their families or friends. If we see his miracles that way, we really miss the point. Jesus' miracles fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies of the coming of God's kingdom. In today's reading from Isaiah, when God's kingdom comes, "*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 dumb will sing.*"

The miracles of Jesus announced the coming of God's kingdom. As Jesus himself announced at the beginning of his public ministry, "*This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel*" [Mk. 1:15]. Jesus' coming initiated the coming of God's kingdom. However, Jesuit ecclesiologist Fr. Francis Sullivan would distinguish the coming of God's kingdom and the coming of Christ's kingdom. Although Jesus initiated the coming of God's kingdom, I think Fr. Sullivan would argue that Jesus' coming also marked the coming of Christ's kingdom as defined by the Preface for the Feast of Christ the King, "a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love, and peace."

In light of this, today's readings offer us a word of comfort and a word of challenge. Today's reading from Isaiah begins, "*Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, ... he comes to save you.*" We are living in troubling and frightening times. As we all know, there is chaos in our Church right now. Our city is becoming more violent. Our country is becoming more polarized. Our world is becoming ever more dangerous. In times like these, God's words, spoken through Isaiah, are words of comfort.

Today's second reading offers a challenge. St. James challenges us to show no partiality, i.e., to show no favoritism. To use the example given by St. James, as individuals and as a community, we should not show favoritism to rich people over poor people. He explains, "*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?*" As God said to Samuel in the Old Testament, "*Do not judge from his appearance ... Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the LORD looks into the heart*" [I Sam. 16:7]. God alone knows the secrets of our hearts. God alone knows the secrets of the hearts of others.

My brothers and sisters, it is not easy to avoid partiality and favoritism. Right now both in the Church and society we see a lot of tribalism. Most of us favor and are partial to those who look like us, who live like us, and who believe, think, and act like us. This becomes really problematic when we start seeing through the lens of *us* versus *them*. This becomes really problematic when we judge ourselves and those who look like us, live like us, and believe, think, and act like us as better than them. We must never forget God's words to Samuel: "*Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the LORD looks into the heart*"