

There is a remarkable unity of theme in today's Mass readings for the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Between the First Reading from the great prophet Isaiah and the psalm (Psalm 145), are highlighted the blind, the deaf, the lame, the hungry, prisoners, those who are bowed down, widows and orphans, the stranger and the just. In the Second Reading from the Letter of James, traditionally attributed to Saint James, the "brother" of the Lord and the first Bishop of Jerusalem, it is the poor who are crowned as heirs to the Kingdom of God: "Listen, my dear brothers: it was those who are poor according to the world that God chose, to be rich in faith and to be the heirs to the kingdom which he promised to those who love him."

In the gospel, Saint Mark observes that the people's "admiration for Jesus was unbounded, 'He has done all things well,' they said 'he makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak.' "

All four of this Sunday's readings from Sacred Scripture highlight the role of "the Retribution of God", a God who will come as Saviour. This retribution is salvific against the forces of evil which are the cause of all the innocent suffering in the people mentioned in the various categories named in the readings.

To add insult to injury, Saint James challenges those who, "try to combine faith in Jesus Christ, our glorified Lord, with the making of distinctions between classes of people." Somebody advised me recently that one particular communication platform was for "the dominant parishioners". This remark reminded me of what was once the opening sentence in the "Who we are" section of the parish website: "Saint Peter's is blessed with an abundance of friendly, diligent and committed parishioners who regularly attend 10:30am Sunday Mass and take an active part in the variety of activities that occur after Mass and during the week." I don't know how that sentence affected those parishioners who attended the earlier Sunday Mass?

One of the great hallmarks of the Catholic Church is that, at the core of its belief and practice, following the doctrine of Saint James, the first bishop of the original Catholic community in Jerusalem, she does not "make distinctions between classes of people." In more colloquial terms, the Church condones neither snobbery nor inverted snobbery based on either human or religious criteria. In terms of social status, her champions, the saints of the Universal Church, cover a whole glorious spectrum from assistant doorkeepers and unskilled labourers through to kings and queens and popes.

"Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour" was the core motto and symbol of the very early Church, the Christian faith community which was despised and persecuted by "the world". Jesus Christ came primarily as Saviour and healer, to set at rights the spiritual and physical maladies of the human race and of each human person and indeed the groaning of the whole of God's creation to be set free once and for all from the corruption of sin and death.

Footnote on the Letter of James from which today's Second Reading is drawn:

Last Sunday was designated by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference as Social Justice Sunday 2021. The Letter of James has been described as "a manifesto for social justice", and among all its pieces of advice this is certainly a strong emphasis. Concern for the poor and the

less fortunate runs right through the Bible. In more modern times the great Papal Encyclicals on social issues gave the first official teaching anywhere on the rights of exploited classes after the industrial revolution, the right to a just wage, to health care, to form trade unions, and so on. However, it is always instinctive and natural – as today’s witty and poignant reading shows – to give more honour to “the great and the good” at the front than to the tramp who shuffles in at the back of the Church, forgetting that in God’s eyes they have just the same value.