

Readings: **Isaiah 43:18-19, 20-22, 24-25**
2 Cor 1:18-22 **Mk2:1-12**

Ps 41

Making a fresh start

There are two themes that are put forward by our readings today. The first is the need for new beginnings. Usually it is a good thing to remember what happened in the past. Thus for instance, it is good to recall what God has done for you, who came to our assistance when we were in dire need, who consoled you when you were hurting and how we narrowly escaped some disaster by God's grace. But remembering can also be disadvantageous in certain circumstances. For example, if you have been hurt and you are carrying unforgiveness towards the person who hurt you, at some point, you need to forgive and move on. Carrying unforgiveness or memories of bad things that happened in the past can be a major stumbling block to making a fresh start; they cripple us in to inaction and close us to the possibility of making a fresh start. In order to start anew, one has in such cases to put the past out of our mind and open oneself up to the possibility of change. That is why the Lord says to the people of Israel: I want you to have a fresh start and to begin a new way; so forget about the bad things that you did in the past, I choose to forgive you and give you a fresh new start. Don't dwell on what on your poor past track record because I choose to make things new for you.

The second theme is that we need to get involved with the cares of others. When we gather together for worship we usually address ourselves as "brothers and sisters in Christ." Well, a certain immigrant, new in town, attended a neighbourhood church for years without making any new acquaintances. As soon as service is over worshippers would gather in small familiar groups and exchange pleasantries with old friends and nobody ever seemed to notice him. So one day he decides to go to church wearing his baseball cap. As soon as he took his lonely seat at the back of the church the usher comes to him and says, "Brother, we don't wear caps in church here." "Thanks," he replies but does not remove his cap. During communion he goes up for communion and the deacon pulls him aside and gently says to him, "My brother, wearing of caps is forbidden in our church." "Thanks," he replies but does not take off his cap. After service the priest who is shaking hands with worshippers greets him very well for the first time and then courteously adds, "But, my dear brother, wearing of caps in church is not allowed." "I know," says the man, "but I have been coming to this church for two years now and no one ever seemed to notice me." until today when I put on this baseball cap.

Isn't it interesting that everyone who addressed our young man that day addressed him as "brother." But the poor man was dying of loneliness in a crowd of "brothers and sisters."

The point this man was trying to make also comes through in today's gospel, namely, that it is not enough for Christians who worship together to call themselves brothers and sisters in name; they must also show themselves to be friends in deed. They must get involved with the cares of those who are their fellow-worshippers and their neighbours in the world.

The event described in today's gospel, the healing of the paralyzed man, took place in Peter's house in Capernaum is an example of getting involved with the cares of others. From early church history and archaeology we know that the house of Peter became one of the first Christian house churches. The early Christian readers of Mark's Gospel knew this, so they would probably read the story as something happening within the setting of a church. The huge crowd that gathered around the house would represent worshippers, each one seeking to obtain one blessing or the other from Jesus. But in their preoccupation with their own personal needs they became insensitive to the needs of someone, who was in even greater need than themselves, the paralytic. The paralyzed man was forgotten in their rush and struggled to get the attention of Jesus.

The twist in the story occurs when four friendly men in the congregation go to attend to the needs of the paralyzed man lying by the sidewalk. His need, like that of any other worshipper in the congregation that day was to get close to Jesus and receive his blessing. These four "friends" realised that this disabled man should have that opportunity. The congregation, in its insensitivity, impedes their plan to bring the paralysed man lying on a stretcher to the forefront. But where there is a will there is a way, even if it meant unroofing the church. And that is precisely what they do. "**When Jesus saw *their* faith...**" – the faith of his friends not that of the paralysed man – he healed the paralysed man, soul and body. One may then ask, which group proved themselves to be brothers and sisters to the paralysed man? His fellow worshippers who called themselves brothers and sisters? No. It was the four men who identified themselves as his friends.

How many people would you identify as your "friends" out of all the "brothers and sisters" who worship with you in this church? Do you know them by name? Do you know what their critical needs are: whether they need a job or someone to help them complete their immigration forms. A friend in need is a friend indeed. This is what we should become before we call ourselves brothers and sisters in Christ.

This coming Wednesday, we begin the season of Lent and so we have a great opportunity to use both the themes of today's readings. Lent is meant to be a new start, a time of turning towards God. Don't get discouraged by your past. God is giving each of us a new chance to get closer to Him. We also need to get involved in Lent with others both through our works of charity as well the time and attention we give to others. Make a fresh start, everything is now new. Get involved with God through the people He puts around us in our world. Amen.