

# Pastoral Message: September 5, 2021

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In today's reading, the prophet Isaiah writes in a time of international upheaval. The people are uncertain about the future of their nation. There is a sense of powerlessness that leads to a paralysis to move forward. This is certainly not unlike the time we are living in, and the prophet Isaiah speaks a word of hope to release the people from the abyss of despair. The prophet, like a poet or artist, dreams of a world where people are released from the destructive throes of death and go forth recreated and transformed. Those who are held down and oppressed find their voice and even the destruction of the environment is healed—an important message for us today with the reality and effects of global warming. Perhaps this message seems unrealistic and too good to possibly be true. Yet it seems that some of the most beautiful visions of a future come out of the most difficult times when just looking at our sacred scripture, or even writings, poetry, and art in human history. Perhaps the message of the prophet is that, despite the difficulties of the reality of the current situation, grace is about the possibility of what new realities and dreams come to birth in us. The prophet would call this hope.

Today's reading from the Letter of St James, written a few decades later than the Gospel of Mark that we hear today, shows a community that has become comfortable and complacent, forgetting its ultimate vision of the reign of God that does not make distinctions but came for good news of all people. To put it in contemporary terms, if the bishop comes in with his miter and crosier and we treat him better than the homeless man that wanders in off the street, have we not made distinctions? Are we not all sometimes perhaps guilty of falling into that trap? I remember once when I was working in hospital this man who was a particularly difficult patient kept saying that a well-known Senator was going to come visit him today. Myself and the other hospital staff sort of thought sure, yeah right. We were all shocked when the senator walked in asking for the patient's room number. Looking back, it was amazing how quickly our attitudes changed toward a patient that was seen as a burden just minutes earlier. The gospel challenges us not to make these distinctions.

This week, I was inspired by a story of a Catholic priest by the name of Frank Dos Reis, working in Brazil, who died suddenly on August 21st of Covid 19. He had been working in a neighborhood known as Crackland where there were many drug addicts. This priest was working to help them get into treatment. This priest, Frank Dos Reis, could identify with them for he was once a crack addict just like them. One former drug addict pointed out how happy he was and that he did not keep an arms-length distance like other missionaries and priests. Fr Dos Reis had contracted covid by hugging this homeless man. I don't tell this story as a message for us to throw caution at the wind for COVID 19, but rather that Fr Dos Reis is a witness of embodying the reign of God. Fr Dos Reis is similar to the Jesus in the gospel, who never put himself superior to others, but brought healing by entering in as an equal in the human condition and absorbing suffering with Love. In today's gospel, Jesus moves to the Decapolis Greek territory. Some scholars tell us the deaf and mute man represents the inclusive message of the gospel for all people. Perhaps it also asks us where we need to be released or what obstacles are in our lives that hold us back, and how the Holy Spirit wants to help us find our voice again. I would suggest it also offers us our mission that Fr Dos Reis witnessed with his life so powerfully. Pope Francis describes Fr Dos Reis and our mission so clearly: "I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting, and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security."