

## 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Book of the prophet Isaiah concludes with an astounding vision of the reach of faith. Today's first reading comes from Isaiah's last chapter. The Lord declares, "I come to gather nations of every language; they shall come and see my glory." To achieve that goal, he would send Jewish survivors from the exile into distant nations we've never heard of: "Tarshish, Put and Lud, Mosoch, Tubal and Javan." The people living there had never heard of the Lord. Nonetheless, the Lord had high expectations of this mission, saying, people from those "distant coastlands... shall proclaim my glory among [other] nations." They would not just hear about the Lord; they would praise him and proclaim him. If any Israelites were scattered around those lands, these new believers would return these "brothers and sisters from all the nations as an offering to the Lord." After faraway Gentiles heard about the God of the Jewish people, they would gather up the remaining Jewish exiles and stream toward Jerusalem by any means: "on horses and in chariots, in carts, upon mules" and camels. The passage closes with this clincher: The Lord says, "Some of these I will take as priests and Levites." Some of the converts from distant Gentile lands would become leaders of Jewish worship in Jerusalem.

The lectionary gives us this passage to anticipate today's gospel, where Jesus declares that "people will come from the east and the west and from the north and the south and will recline at table in the kingdom of God." Jesus shared with Isaiah a vision of the reach of faith. Today, Christianity fulfills this oracle: It extends to many distant coastlands around the world.

We may disagree with how some other Christians put their faith into practice, but Jesus intended to gather very different sheep into one fold. The differences among us may distract us from our astounding unity of faith.

Sometimes we act like people on Isaiah's coastlands who had never heard of the Lord. We may be surprised to learn some beliefs in our catechism or some passages in the bible. Some people may challenge our beliefs. If we hear an opposing opinion from someone we find disagreeable, we usually dismiss it, but if someone trustworthy delivers the same opinion, we open our ears. As Isaiah's coastlands were ripe for conversion, we can be too.

At worst, we sometimes discover we have drifted far from the presence of God. We see candidly some habits we have formed or abandoned, some words we have been using, some unkind judgments we have formed, making our hearts small and hard. When we discover that, we best do what the people in the coastlands did in the last chapter of Isaiah: They focused as if for the first time on God's glory, not on their own, and they chose any means of available transport—from carts to camels—to get themselves into the presence of God together with other believers. Once we are there, we may learn God has something further in mind—some new direction we are to take, perhaps even as a leader, Levite or priest.

The reach of faith extends to all the world, so the redeemed include you and the people next to you. When we put ourselves in God's presence and open up to God's call, we will forsake ourselves to proclaim the glory of God.

Sunday, August 21, 2022