

August 24 – 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
Prepared by Teresa Caitlin McGee, former Maryknoll lay missioner

Isaiah 22: 15, 19-23	A change of power is described – where the new leader is given fine robes, authority and the key to the House of David
Psalms 138: 1-2, 2-3, 6, 8	God is generous and faithful, and cares for the lowly.
Romans 11: 33-36	Who has known the mind of God?
Matthew 16: 13-20	Peter recognizes Jesus as the Christ, Son of David and the living God, fulfillment of the prophecies.

St. Paul's letter to the Romans bridges the gap between what seems like a harsh reading from Isaiah and Peter's recognition of Jesus as the Messiah. Paul asks the question that works its way through our lives, particularly when we are confronted with the deep human suffering that is so present in our world. Indeed, who has known the mind of God? How are we to understand the mystery of God's glory, mercy, wisdom, and tenderness in the face of human experience that seems to make those qualities seem quite distant? We are often left pondering the question of exactly what God has in mind for us as individuals and the world as we are bombarded by images of what is so very wrong in human life. This summer has brought a whole new set of natural disasters made worse by human error or failure to respond adequately to floods, earthquakes, and cyclones. Many of those disasters have hit close to home, among people who have never expected such personal experience of powerlessness over nature. Climate change has intensified the storms, impacted the flow and patterns of rivers, clouds and oceans. Our relationship with the natural world is in jeopardy. The global food and energy crisis and ongoing, brutal wars are experienced deep in the heart of humanity. How are we to understand God's presence in the midst of these sorrows and injustices? How does the wisdom of God stir our hearts toward compassion?

Isaiah addresses people celebrating Jerusalem's deliverance from the hands of its enemies in 720 B.C. Today's passage is redacted from a chapter in which Isaiah strongly challenges the "joy and merriment" over a won battle. Isaiah speaks of Yahweh's call to the people to mourn what has been lost in the destruction of the battle, to "weep bitterly" without comfort at "the ruin of the daughter of my people." This is a stunning description of the desolation caused by battle, the shadow side of joy and celebration that Isaiah finds so difficult to bear. Our lectionary reading picks up with Isaiah's harsh prophecy that there will be punishment by God for the deeds done in the course of the war. We are left with the image of God waiting to pounce on those who have done great damage to others, and can only rejoice in their victory. We prayed with the psalmist who reminds us of God's generosity and glory, the blessings of creation and God's fidelity. This song of praise naturally leads us to Paul's question about the mind of God, and his hymn about wisdom and mercy. Paul raises the question after a series of chapters in which he recounted salvation history and proclaimed the new creation brought about through the paschal mystery.

We know the mind of God through Jesus. His life, death and resurrection reveal the self emptying love of God that seeks to heal division, mend the broken, and bring justice to the nations. Jesus remembers and mourns violence and destruction in his time, weeping over the city of Jerusalem and at the grave of his friend Lazarus. Today's reading from the book of Matthew is situated between Jesus' warnings about the Pharisees and Sadducees false teachings and his first prophecy about the passion. He warns against "the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees," a curious reference given Jesus own use of leaven as a metaphor for the Reign of God. Yeast can ferment the dough and make the bread rise, or it can turn foul and poisonous. It is possible to misjudge the quality of the leaven and accept false teachings that appear to be holy, in Jesus time and in our own. Jesus observation that the Pharisees and Sadducees cannot "read the signs of the times" refers to the fact that they cannot see the life and work of Jesus as the opening of a new, Messianic age revealed in loaves and fishes, healing the sick, and a reversal of understanding the power of God. "Reading the signs of the times" is a phrase that appears repeatedly in Catholic

social teaching; to know and take direction from Christ in our midst is to listen to the poor, the disenfranchised, the wounded and the oppressed. Failing to read the signs is to ignore the very presence of Christ. We read the signs of the times by bringing Christian consciousness into dialogue with the human needs and presence of faith that help us differentiate truth from falsehood. Sometimes the falsehood is attractive and socially rewarded, as in the sin of overconsumption, or celebration of achievement that does not recognize imbalance in the world.

We know the quality of leaven by how it transforms the lives of those we are least likely to call our neighbors.

In this context Jesus asks the question “Who do you say that I am?” Peter recognizes Jesus as the Christ, Son of David and the living God, fulfillment of the prophecies. Jesus states that Peter has come to know this not through human understanding and expectation of the Messiah, but through God. Peter has seen with God’s own eyes. Jesus reveals himself in what and who we most seek to avoid in human society. It is the poor, the meek, the peacemakers, and the grief stricken – among others – who reveal the Reign of God. Jesus performs miracles in the lives of people who hunger and thirst, suffer terrible diseases, and are kept from the temple. If we are to know and see the face of God, we must look beyond our borders and comfort zones. We see with God’s own eyes when we set aside the familiar to embrace those who are outcaste, bring the lives of the poor into our daily world, tend the earth and act as stewards of our resources. It is in recognition and response to others that things are loosed in heaven and on earth. We know the mind of God when we set aside prejudice, preconceived notions of power, violence and all forms of tyranny. We discover in acceptance that any of us are given to poison the communal bread by sin, that Christ meets us and liberates us at the edges of our human limitations.

Jesus’ ironic demand – that at the very moment of recognition the truth be kept secret – is best understood through the prophecy of the passion that follows today’s passage. Immediately after Peter’s recognition, Jesus tells the disciples that he will suffer, die and rise in Jerusalem. Jesus lets it be known that he will walk right into the heart of human cruelty and violence, revealing that death does not have the final word. Peter wants to stop the passion and in the other synoptic gospels goes on at some length about how this should not happen to Jesus. Jesus’ rebuke to Peter recognizes how fleeting his, and our, vision of God can be. We are called as Christians to see both sides; the suffering and joy, destruction and possibility. God is present in our deepest sorrows by way of the journey to Jerusalem. Claiming both the cross and resurrection as our heritage, we are called to see and be moved by the suffering of the world, weeping as Jesus wept, and believing in the resurrection, especially when to do so strains our imagination. We can only proclaim Jesus Christ when we accept that call in the concrete actions of compassion and justice. It is then that we see through the eyes of faith and know for certain that the love, mercy, and tenderness of God are eternally present in the bread and wine of our daily lives.

For more information:

Read Maryknoll’s “Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world,” a resource developed by Maryknoll missionaries who witness the global impact of U.S. political and economic decisions. Through this resource, Maryknoll missionaries encourage voters in the 2008 elections to scrutinize candidates’ policy proposals through the lens of those who, both in the U.S. and overseas, lack basic necessities, endure the scourge of racism, live with gender-based discrimination or feel the immediate impact of climate change.

Email for a copy, or find the election guide here: www.maryknollogc.org/2008elections/index.htm

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns: *Peace, Social Justice & Integrity of Creation*

P.O. Box 29132 Washington, D.C. 20017

phone: (202)832-1780 fax: (202)832-5195

ogc@maryknoll.org www.maryknollogc.org