

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Sep 6th 2015

Pope Francis aptly titled his first formal statement on living the Christian faith *The Joy of the Gospel*. Pope Francis concludes his introduction to the encyclical with a powerful statement from his predecessor Benedict XVI: "Being a Christian is not a result of an ethical choice or lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction."

Christian faith is the encounter of believers with the person of Jesus Christ risen from the dead. The pope wants to emphasize that faith is not only a commitment to a set of lofty truths and ethical ideas, but it is also — and even more importantly -- a personal relationship with Jesus Christ! This encounter with Jesus does indeed give believers a new horizon and direction in life but it gives us much more. It gives us the comfort of knowing that our God is always with us no matter what happens in our lives. This conviction always results in joy! And so Pope Francis entitles his first encyclical *The Joy of the Gospel*.

Each of today's readings is an invitation for us to reflect on how our encounter with God in faith can bring us comfort and joy — even amid our trials.

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah speaks to a very discouraged Hebrew community in exile from their homeland living as captives in Babylon. Isaiah reminds them that they are not alone. He assures them that God has not forgotten them and God will indeed rescue them and revive their fearful frightened hearts:

"Thus says the Lord:

Say to those whose hearts are frightened:

Be strong, fear not!

Here is your God,

He comes to save you (Is 3-4)."

The psalmist also addresses his message to those who are oppressed and suffering, also assuring them that God has not forgotten them and that they are not alone:

"The God of Jacob keeps faith forever,
secures justice for the oppressed,
gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets captives free (Ps 146: 7)."

And the New Testament passage from Mark's gospel echoes this theme. Jesus' compassion for the suffering was well known, so the people brought to Jesus a deaf man who had a speech impediment. The man encounters Jesus directly as Jesus takes him off by himself and touches his ears and tongue — "And immediately the man's ears were opened, his speech impediment was removed, and he spoke plainly."

At the beginning of his pontificate Pope Francis is encouraging us to encounter Jesus directly in faith and so experience a "new freshness" in our faith. From this new freshness will flow a renewed desire to evangelize and spread the joy of the Gospel: "Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today's world."

Today's scriptures invite us to encounter God directly in faith — especially in our trials — and so experience anew the freshness of the Gospel. The comfort and joy of our encounters with Jesus combined with the knowledge that we are never alone give us new energy for sharing faith more effectively with others.

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