

This Sunday's Readings – the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time – The connection between today's Old Testament reading and the Gospel reading might seem elusive. However, there is a connection as we shall see.

The first reading is from the last chapter of the Book of Isaiah (3rd Isaiah), which was written shortly after the return of the exiles from Babylon, around 500 BCE. It had been a long journey from Babylon to Jerusalem and there was great rejoicing at their arrival, even though Jerusalem and the temple were totally destroyed by the Babylonians. The Lord tells the people to rejoice with Jerusalem. Here Jerusalem is represented as a mother welcoming back her children. The Lord will provide for the people and bring prosperity back to Jerusalem so that the people will know the power of the Lord. Reginald Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* comments on how this reading connects with the Gospel reading – “Originally this prophecy from Third Isaiah spoke of the joy following the restoration of God's people from exile. The returning exiles are received back by the holy city as a mother who consoles them at her breasts and dandies them on her lap. The metaphor is mixed, for it also speaks of YHWH sending his “prosperity” (*shalom*, which the caption inadequately renders as peace presumably to establish a link with the gospel) like a river. (Note the reference to peace in the second reading also; otherwise there seems to be very little connection between the three readings.)”

The Gospel reading from Luke recounts the story of the “Mission of the Seventy-two”. This particular story is unique to Luke as Reginald Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* explains – “All three synoptic Gospels record a mission of the Twelve during Jesus' earthly ministry. The mission of the Seventy (some texts have seventy-two) is peculiar to Luke. In chapter 9 Luke has already followed his Marcan source for the mission of the Twelve. Here he follows Q and his special material for the mission of the Seventy. The Q material is also used by Matthew in his mission charge to the Twelve. So it is clear that the idea of a mission of the Seventy was created, not by Q or Mark, but by Luke or his special material”. There is also a bit of controversy over whether it is seventy or seventy-two. Some ancient texts specify seventy while others specify seventy-two. However, seventy-two is a unique number. It represented all the known civilized nations of the world. This is indicative of Luke's overall theme of universality that the Good News is for both Jew and Gentile alike. The seventy-two are sent out to prepare the way for Jesus as He journeys to Jerusalem, just as John the Baptist did. However, unlike John, these disciples have heard the Good News from Jesus. So how are these two readings connected? The seventy-two, when they returned from their mission, rejoiced just as the people rejoiced when they returned to Jerusalem after over 50 years in exile in Babylon. But there is an even more important connection. The exiles journeyed from Babylon to Jerusalem with great rejoicing upon their arrival. Jesus is also journeying to Jerusalem with great rejoicing at His arrival followed very quickly by rejection. It is in Jerusalem that Jesus will usher in the new Kingdom of God through His suffering, death, and resurrection.

Unless we understand the cultural implications in the Gospel reading, we can easily misinterpret the true meaning. John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday*

by Sunday, Cycle C helps us understand this – “Two very distinctive Mediterranean ideas strike the Western reader in this passage: hospitality and human power over the spirit world. In the Mediterranean world hospitality is extended almost exclusively by men and only to strangers. Graciousness extended to relatives or near relatives is called “steadfast love” or “steadfast loving kindness.” In the ancient world, any person who departed from the family village entered a foreign and hostile world. Death was always and everywhere a threat. Such a traveler had to rely on the kindness of a village elder to extend hospitality and temporary protection from those who intended to harm or kill this stranger (see Gen 18:1-16; 19:1-26). Jesus, therefore, utters a cultural truism when he says to the seventy: “I am sending you as lambs into the midst of wolves”—strangers among nonrelatives (Luke 10:3). In the peasant world of the Middle East there are no free gifts. Every gift comes with a string attached. A common proverb says: “Don't thank me: you will repay me.” Jesus advises his disciples to be discriminating in accepting hospitality on their journey. If the host reciprocates their greeting of “peace,” the disciples should stay there and preach and heal the sick. On the other hand, if the town insults them by refusing to extend hospitality, they are to go to the town square (a very public place) and publicly return the insult. Both gestures—healing and preaching, and the public insult—bear witness that “the reign of God approaches and is indeed near.” Our Mediterranean ancestors in the Faith not only recognized a rich and densely populated spirit world, but they also arranged the entire cosmos in a hierarchy as follows: (1) God; (2) gods or sons of God, or archangels; (3) lower non-human persons: angels, spirits, demons; (4) humankind; (5) creatures lower than humankind. Beings higher on this ladder controlled those beneath them, but sometimes—though very rarely—a lower being could control a higher being. Notice in the New Testament that no one denies the reality of Jesus casting demons out of possessed persons. Rather, they charge that he has no legitimate authorization to use this power (Luke 20:2) or that he has obtained his power from the devil (Luke 11:15). Jesus, in turn, gave this same power to his disciples. Sometimes it was not effective (Luke 9:40), but in today's story it seems to have been very effective: “Lord, in your name, even the demons submit to us!” (Luke 10:17”).

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