

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Jun 27th 2013

The readings today combine two interesting perspectives with the first reading focused upon the story of Hagar and the gospel warning us that we need to walk the talk. The responsorial psalm between the two, invites us to praise the Lord.

The story of Hagar has always fascinated me. First, the concept of sending someone else to be with one's husband was always difficult for me to understand. Yet, I knew this was not very uncommon at that time. Still, how does one cope with that? It seems as though Sarai did find that challenging even though it was her suggestion. Too often, we make decisions and then take out the consequences on others. Both women seemed unkind to each other. Hagar appeared to take full advantage of the situation and behaved poorly. Hagar even with her poor behavior is visited by a messenger from God. She does take comfort in the message about her son. Even though she had to swallow her pride and return to be subservient to Sarai, Hagar follows her faith and returns believing the will of God. I can only imagine how she felt during those early years of Ishmael's life. The child of the great Abram – held in the highest of regard. Understandably, this would be very difficult for Sarai. However, the tables were turned when Isaac was born. The concept of sibling rivalry takes on new meaning when considering the relationship between Isaac and Ishmael. Sarai [now called Sarah] demanded that Hagar and Ishmael both be exiled. There was divine intervention for Hagar and Ishmael as they were dying of thirst in the desert. With all of this, Hagar never stopped believing in God and praying for rescue. We now know that the descendants of Ishmael are as numerous as the descendants of Isaac.

During our Justice Walk on Good Friday, we have reflected on Hagar's story as one exiled, alone and suffering yet seeking her God and believing that He would save her son. I always see Hagar as a fierce mother who will do anything to save her son. Sarah is the same. . . a mother wanting to protect her son. Perhaps they are not very different at all – mothers whose faith sustain them through all challenges. I remember well a time in my life many years ago when I worried for my son and hit my knees praying to Mary, another mother, with deep, abiding love for her son. I knew she would listen to my prayers and understand my plea.

The gospel points out that our deeds alone will not save us. While it is certainly not a bad thing to do good deeds, I believe the point is that it is not the deed in isolation that has meaning. Our attitude in performing such good works and our motives and goals for doing so are the key. If we are doing good to seek attention and praise, then we will hear Jesus say, "I never knew you." It is through grace that we will enter Heaven, grace that is freely given to us when we follow the word of the Lord. There is no way to buy that grace with deeds and with what we do. Rather, it is through truly knowing God and following his word – it is what is in our hearts and how we manifest that to others reflecting our beliefs. As St. Francis of Assisi is quoted as saying, "Spread the gospel at all times, if necessary, use words. . ."

Nancy Shirley