**Readings:** Isaiah 35:4-7/ James 2:1-5/ Mark 7:31-37
**Theme:** Physically or Spiritually Challenged?
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

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At paralympic games, some of those we inappropriately call ‘disabled’ achieve amazing feats.  Even, the term ‘physically challenged’ is still less appropriate to describe them, for some of them can run faster than most of us who are ‘physically’ abled.   Again, most of us can see the black and white keys of the keyboard, but cannot play the organ or piano; whereas, the blind Steve Wonder, who cannot see even the colour differentiation of the black and white keys, is wonderful on the keyboard.  So who is physically challenged: Steve Wonder or those who cannot play the keyboard?

As the coach of a paralympic athlete sees in him/her, not disability, but ability, and as the music teacher of Steve Wonder saw in him, not a physical challenge, but talent, so God, according to the prophet Isaiah (in the first reading), saw in the blind of Israel, not darkness or gloom, but the potential or ability to appreciate the glory of God. He saw in the deaf, not hearing blockage, but the potential to receive and cherish the good news of salvation. He saw in the lame, not disability, but the desire and ability to depend on God. And He saw in the dumb, not the inability to speak, but the potential to eagerly proclaim the goodness of the Lord.

Let me put the above message in another way.  In the days of the prophet Isaiah, many of the people of Israel who had eyes to see did not appreciate the goodness and glory of God.  On the other hand, God knew that many blind people appreciated His goodness and glory. To such blind persons, therefore, the prophet announced the encouraging message of the Lord: ‘Courage! Do not be afraid. Look, your God is coming . . . to save you.  Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened’ (Is. 35:4-5).  Years later, Jesus would fulfill this in His ministry.  In John 9, for instance, when people were debating why the man was born blind, Jesus said it was meant to reveal the glory of God; and when He eventually opened the eyes of the man, the latter praise God and His goodness.

Again, in the days of Isaiah, many Israelites, who were capable of hearing the message of the Lord through the prophet, ignored it. God, however, knew how eager the deaf were to hear His message. Hence, the prophet proclaimed to them: ‘Courage! Do not be afraid. Look, your God is coming . . . to save you.  Then . . . the ears of the deaf shall be unsealed’ (Is. 35:4-5).  In today’s gospel reading, we find an example of Jesus opening the ears of a deaf man, and how eagerly, the man received the good news of salvation.

Furthermore, in the days of Isaiah, many Israelites with strong and healthy legs did not walk on the path of righteousness.  On the other hand, many lamed persons walked on the path of righteousness. Hence, the prophet announced to them: ‘Courage! Do not be afraid. Look, your God is coming . . . to save you.  . . . then the lame shall leap like a deer’ (Is. 35:4, 6).  And Jesus several times in his ministry made the lame (who walked with the Lord in faith) to instantly get up, pick up their mats and walk away.

Once more, in the days of Isaiah, many of those who were capable of speaking bore no testimony about the goodness and mercy of the Lord; whereas the Lord knew how eager many dumb people were to proclaim His goodness and mercy.  Hence, the prophet assured them: ‘Courage! Do not be afraid. Look, your God is coming . . . to save you.  . . . the tongues of the dumb sing for joy’ (Is. 35:4, 6).  The eagerness of healed dumb persons to proclaim the goodness and mercy of God is very evident in today’s gospel reading; for the more Jesus ordered the healed man and others to keep quiet, the more they proclaimed: ‘he has done all things well; he makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak’ (Mark 7:37).

Beloved, if God’s good news of salvation was preferentially addressed to the blind, deaf, lame and dumb, then it should be clear that God does not judge by appearance; and that judging by appearance is wrong.  But because often we judge by appearance, today’s second reading admonishes us not to discriminate between two people: favouring one merely because he/she is more nobly dressed than the other.  Beloved, an angel would not enter this church with majestic wings but in a simple and humble manner.  That is why Hebrews 13:2 says that we should be welcoming to strangers, for some have entertained angels without knowing it.  And is it not because we are so fond of judging by appearance that many missed the first coming of the Son of God born in the manger in Bethlehem?

**PRAYERS:** Beloved, I wish to conclude with these prayers:

* As the Lord gave sight to the blind because of their ability to appreciate his goodness and glory, so may he open our spiritual eyes to appreciate ever more His goodness to us as well as His great glory, amen!
* As the Lord opened the ears of the deaf because of their eagerness to receive His message, so may He open our spiritual ears to be always attentive to His good news and forever cherish it, amen!
* As the Lord made the lame to leap like a deer because they walked on the path of righteousness, so may He enable our spiritual limbs to walk steadily and steadfastly on the path of righteousness, amen!
* As the Lord released the tongues of the dumb because they were eager to proclaim His goodness and mercy, so may He loosen our tongues in spirit so we may eagerly testify to His goodness and mercy.
* Finally, as God judges not by appearance but by what is in our hearts, so may He enable our spiritual eyes to see as He sees, amen!