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Placed at God's Service

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Placed at God's Service

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Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sunday Readings for September 6, 2009 for Cycle B:

Is 35:4-7; Ps 146:7-10; James 2:1-5; Mk 7:31-37

PLACED AT GOD'S SERVICE

Lawrence E. Frizzell

The traditional Jewish morning prayer combines many reflections about God's sublime spiritual gifts to his people with a deep appreciation of the blessings of our daily existence. The following text celebrates the mystery of life itself.

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, you formed the human being with wisdom and created within each person a system of ducts and tubes. It is well known before your glorious throne that if even one of the former be opened or one of the latter be closed, it would be impossible to exist in your presence. Blessed are you, O Lord; you heal all creatures and do wonders.

Does our morning prayer include an act of thanksgiving for the gift of faith? Do we show appreciation for our five senses? As the Jewish person opens his or her eyes, there is a prayer of gratitude: "Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, you open the eyes of the blind." As the anointing of the sick emphasizes, our senses can be instruments of sin and need God's healing. It is important to understand how to use them well. In times past children were taught to practice "custody of the senses" to avoid occasion of sin. At no time in history have human beings been so inundated with information and challenges to our senses than in our present society. Nor have there been greater advances in the efforts to overcome disabilities of sight or hearing. These marvels of communication and healing should be celebrated! However, ever greater vigilance must be exercised so that the faithful do not lose sight of the higher goal of life that is constituted by obedient service to the living God.

As the Latin term *ob-audire* indicates, the concept of obedience is rooted in a careful listening to God's Word and its development in the Scriptures and the Church's teaching. Even the written text of the Bible was proclaimed to be heard and taken to heart. Thus the great prayer of ancient Israel and of Jews throughout the ages is a call to listen. "Hear, Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord (Lord alone) and you shall love the Lord you God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Dt 6:4-5). The Letter of James reiterates the teaching of both Jewish teachers and Jesus himself: "Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (1:22, see Luke 11:28).

The poetry of the prophet Isaiah and his disciples includes many passages depicting the hope of Israel for a fuller life in union with God. The marvelous transformation of the wilderness each spring became a symbol of the expectation that God would be manifest in their midst. "They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God" (Is 35:3). Those most in need -- especially those acknowledging their weakness -- would be beneficiaries of God's healing gifts.

For the most part, Jesus restricted his ministry of teaching and healing to the three tribes of Israel that survived after the successive exiles and returned to the promised land. However, the evangelists

tell of a few excursions into neighboring territories. The episode from St. Mark's Gospel proclaimed this Sunday tells of a journey from Lebanon into Syria. People with faith in Jesus brought a man who was deaf and therefore could not speak properly. Using symbolic gestures, Jesus prayed and then commanded in Aramaic that the man's ears be opened and his tongue loosened. Such healing would remind Jews of the prophecy: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped... and the tongue of the mute sing for joy" (Is 35:5-6).

Indeed people should have rejoiced and celebrated the marvel of God's healing power shown through the work of Jesus. In the same way, we should be grateful for the gifts of sight, hearing and speech, ever aware of how fragile they are. But Jesus forbade an enthusiastic spreading of news about his miracles. To be understood properly, these signs had to be placed within the larger context of his teaching -- and eventually seen in the light of his death and resurrection. So too, we should acknowledge that our bodily faculties are to be placed at God's service -- and our entire being and way of life should draw people to search for God's ways.