

**21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**Nancy M. Ring**

**All Saints Parish**  
**Syracuse, NY**

**HOMILY FOR AUGUST 24-25, 2013**

The reading from Isaiah seems timeless as it repeats a favorite theme of the prophets: The God of Israel is understood to be the God of all nations. When other nations come to accept Israel's God, some from these lands will even become priests and Levites in Yahweh's service. This reading is very contemporary and applies to us today as we struggle among our nation and the world of nations with the question of who belongs and who doesn't. Whenever new persons are welcomed into a group, the identity of the group changes. The group gains something, but to gain something, it must give up something. It must give up the security of the status quo, of the familiar. As our world shrinks through instant communication and a global economy, that is something we need to think about. Exclusion must give way to inclusion; competition must give way to cooperation, but that comes at the price of walking into the unknown. Inclusion and cooperation among individuals and among nations are relatively new concepts to us. It is hard for us to cooperate rather than compete. As individuals, we often seek to succeed at the expense of others. As nation-states and as Americans, we define boundaries that keep others out. But in this first reading, God seeks to gather the nations of every language to worship on God's holy mountain in Jerusalem. It's true, the nations would be coming to Jerusalem, but Jerusalem would be changed by their inclusion. Just for this week, I invite you to join me in imagining how our lives as individuals and our world would look if we based our decisions on the inclusion of others rather than their exclusion. What would it be like to see others, immigrants, foreigners, who come to our shores as gifts to be embraced rather than problems with which to deal?

Teilhard de Chardin taught that evolution was based upon competition until humans emerged; now, humans can evolve only through cooperation. We either cooperate or we die out. So far, we humans haven't been very good at cooperation. Look at the wars fought all over the world to protect self-interest. Look at the wars our nation has fought to protect its image in the world. Is image and dominance worth the billions of dollars that could be spent on relieving poverty and improving education?

The second and third readings provide quite a challenge. They remind us that following the God of Jesus is not an easy road to travel. What is all of this about discipline, correction, drooping hands and trembling knees? Where is the Good News in that? First of all, it is so important to remember that we live in the milieu of God's love. We are surrounded by God; God is the air that we breathe. That is so important because discipline must be practiced in the context of love. Otherwise, it is only vindictive and a show of power, and God is not a vindictive God. This reading from Hebrews reminds us that anything worthwhile requires discipline and correction. If we want to reach a goal, discipline is required. If we want to play a musical instrument, we need to practice. Sometimes that seems like repetitious drudgery, but when it all comes together, we forget the drudgery. If we want to play a sport, we have to listen to our coach and submit to his discipline. When we make the tackle or the basket, it all seems worthwhile.

If our goal is to follow the path of the God of Jesus, that requires discipline, also. Knowing, always, that we are graced, loved, we are able to make the decisions required to follow Jesus. We are able to die to competition and rise to cooperation. We are able to put aside complacency and work to bring about change in ourselves and the world. All of this requires some amount of struggle or discipline, or as Saint Paul says, keeping our eye on the prize.

I think our Gospel continues this theme. Salvation is freely offered, but we must accept it by embracing the way of Jesus, by sharing his life. We do that by trying to live as he did: embracing the marginalized; seeking justice for the widow and the orphan, symbols of the most forlorn among us; seeking to cure the lepers, the outcasts of our society, by including them; remaining true to our goal of following Jesus even when it causes us suffering.

Following Jesus requires the discipline of keeping our eyes on the path of Jesus, and we are able to do this because we love him, even when we struggle with him. Recall that the way was not always easy for the disciples. They often misunderstood Jesus, but their love was deeper than any of their misunderstandings or transgression, and Jesus never gave up on them. The Gospel tells us that knowing about Jesus is not enough; we must know Jesus himself, as a person, enter into his very life, converse with him, argue with him, rejoice with him, accept him into the fabric of our lives. Then, we will join the feasting in the Kingdom of God, rejoicing with our ancestors and with those from all over the world who have done the works of Jesus.