

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Isaiah 35:4-7A

Psalms 146:7, 8-9, 9-10

James 2:1-5

Mark 7:31-37

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According to an old story, when the great library of Alexandria burned, one book was saved. It wasn't a valuable book, so it was bought by a poor man, who could read a little, for a few coppers. It wasn't a very interesting book, but there was something interesting in it: a thin strip of vellum on which was written the secret of the "Touchstone."

The touchstone was a small pebble that could turn any common metal into gold. The writing explained that this remarkable pebble was somewhere on the shores of the Black Sea, lying among millions of other pebbles that looked exactly like it. It was, however, possible to distinguish the touchstone from all others, for it felt warm to the touch, while all the other pebbles felt cold.

So the man who had purchased the book sold his few belongings, bought some supplies, camped on the Black Sea shore, and began testing pebbles. He knew that if he picked up ordinary pebbles and threw them down again because they were cold, he might pick up the same pebble hundreds of times. So, when he felt one that was cold, he threw it into the sea. He spent a whole day doing this without finding the touchstone. He spent a month, a year, three years, and still did not find the touchstone. Yet he went on and on this way. Pick up a pebble. It's cold. Throw it into the sea, and so on. But one morning he picked up a pebble that was *warm*. . . He threw it into the sea. He had gotten so into the

habit of throwing the stones into the sea, that when the one he was looking for finally came along. . . .he threw that one away as well.

Living, as we do, in an information age, words have rained down on us all our lives. We couldn't possibly pay attention to them all. But in the course of our lives, we have tested some of the words, and found them to be worthless: sales pitches and shampoo directions, soap operas and situation comedies, slogans on street hoardings, and recipes on cans of soup. And so, as a survival mechanism, we have become deaf and blind to words. Oh, most of us can see and hear them well enough, but we have learned to dismiss them, and ignore them.

It is in this condition that we encounter the Word of God, the word of life. And if we are governed by the habit of a lifetime, we will casually test it and by reflex throw it away, before we have had time to realize what we have done -- what we have lost. It is in this sense that we need Jesus to open our eyes and clear our ears, so that we will *hear* the word, and hold on to it for dear life. For compared to it, everything else is dross.