

Twenty Fifth Sunday of the Year – September 20, 2015

Readings: Wisdom 2:12, 17-20; James 3:16-4:3; Mark 9:30-37

God speaks to us in many ways but there are times when we ourselves refuse to listen to him. He is concerned about us and at every moment presents himself as a caring Father giving the good things for his children. He has planned a future for us like a benevolent Father and he takes care to fulfill it in our lives. We see how God communicates with Jesus in his prayer and manifests his mission to him which is painful death on the cross. However, God looks at the heart of every individual and searches for the spirit of service and humility. The early Christian hymn in the letter to the Philippians talks about how Jesus emptied himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. In response God exalted him and raised him above all creation. This hymn describes the dynamic that is at the heart of life in the trinity: each person of God is constantly pouring out the divine self in love and service to the other persons. Each person is welcoming the other and makes room for the other in the outpouring of love. In the Gospel of today Jesus predicts for the second time his suffering death and resurrection. He goes on to instruct his disciples on the true meaning of discipleship. He tells them that if anyone wants to be first he must be the last and must be the servant of all. In the first reading from the Book of Wisdom we have the picture of the wicked persons plotting against the just. They do not recognize the blessings that come with serving God. In the second reading St. James reminds us that wisdom is a gift of God. He reminds the Christian community of the harm caused by jealousy and selfish ambition.

The first reading taken from the Book of Wisdom explains that a right relationship with God will lead to advantages the world could never match. Today's passage describes the ungodly as planning to torture some righteous just man because he has condemned their mode of living. From their limited viewpoint the wicked presume they have the advantage over the just man. They do not see the larger picture. The wicked dismiss the just man as an obstacle to their plans. They are determined to ignore God's laws and the traditions of their spiritual ancestors. To prove their position they plot to put the just man to death and thereby demonstrating for all to see that the just man's trust in God has absolutely no foundation. In their view the just man is a naïve dreamer. Of course they are mistaken in their thinking. In their obsessive desire for the things of this world the wicked cannot recognize that such things are gifts to them from their creator. Their view of eternity is blocked by all the distractions in this world of time. They will discover only too late that all the advantages belong to the just who serve the

eternal God. The author then speaks of the triumph of wisdom and what is important is the spiritual wisdom. This Spiritual wisdom is beyond the reach of the godless, the foolish and the proud.

In the Second reading James gives practical advice to the fellow Jewish converts on how to live their newly-found Christian faith. He tells them that where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. Selfishness is the source of many evils in an individual and in a community. The passions that dominate a person at times refer to the sinful seeking of pleasure which ruins the relationship of the person with God and with others. Wisdom is a gift of God. It is pure and from above. It is peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. It is the source of every virtue. Obviously these virtues bring peace to an individual and contribute to the building up of a community. Each member will live in peace, sincerity, justice and truthfulness supporting each other in their need. It is generally understood that human wisdom leads us to covet something and when we cannot obtain it we engage in disputes and conflicts. Spiritual wisdom leads to holiness. James then adds to say that if we ask we will get it and often we do not get what we ask because we do not ask properly. Today, we need to pray above all for that spirit of service, for that deep down attitude of reaching out and wanting the wellbeing of those around us, no matter whom they are or what kind of people they are. This will bring us closer to God and to every other person and result in our own enrichment.

In today's Gospel reading we have the second of the three predictions of his suffering, death and resurrection that Jesus makes in the Good News of Mark. Between the two predictions Jesus had given Peter James and John, the scene of the Transfiguration, a glimpse of the glory that was to be his after the resurrection. The reason for this would appear to be to encourage the apostles through their leaders to bear the scandal which his passion and death would be for them sometime in the near future. This prediction follows the same threefold structure as did the first: prediction, misunderstanding and corrective teaching. Again Jesus is portrayed as teaching the disciples as they journey through Galilee. Jesus and his disciples were making their way through the Northern Province of Galilee quietly that he did not want people to know where they were going. It looks as if Jesus wants to have more time with his disciples. Part of that teaching includes telling the disciples that the Son of Man will be handed over, killed and three days rise again from the dead. Even though Jesus had clearly said these things to them some time earlier they had no clue as to what he was telling them. We recollect how for the first time Jesus told them of his passion and death, Peter reacted very

strongly and Jesus reacted more strongly still. This time they were more cautious. They were unable to grasp his teaching about his sufferings. His arrest, passion and death on the cross came as a shattering blow for them destroying their concept of Messiah. Their idea of a Messiah was one of authoritative person to free them from the foreign rule. They also had seen the miraculous powers of Jesus and they could not accept him to surrender easily to his enemies. This passage seems to lead them closer to the understanding of God's plan for the Messiah.

Through all his life, through everything that constitutes the very essence of his person, Jesus is the Christ, the one whom God chose to bring to the world the life-giving Spirit, the Spirit who is Lord and who gives Life, as we say in the Creed. He will live forever and give life to the world. So when Jesus speaks of his death, his disciples were unable to understand what Jesus meant by it. During his life Jesus challenged many people thus opposing their way of life and for being untrue to the real meaning of their traditions, of worshipping only with their lips with their hearts far from God. Soon people turned against him and planned his death. His gentleness and endurance and his love for us were proved beyond doubt. He did not challenge them in the way they anticipated. Now when he repeatedly explains of his passion, even though they had seen the challenge to him, they fail to understand the real situation. He told them that he will be "delivered" or "handed over", a theme word running through the New Testament. John the Baptist was "handed over" to Herod to be executed. Jesus was handed over by Judas to his fellow-Jews. They, in turn, handed him over to the Romans they hated to be crucified. Later, the disciples themselves will be handed over to kings and rulers. And, in every Eucharist, the Body of Jesus is handed over for us to break and share together.

The Gospel passage of today indicates that the disciples and Jesus were clearly on a collision path. Jesus was teaching them about the necessity of suffering and service and all they could think about was power and prestige. This comes out very strongly when Jesus confronts his disciples about their conversation during their journey. They were in the "house" mentioned meaning their meeting place or their place of residence. They were highly embarrassed and very reluctant to disclose to him what they had been arguing about because at the center of their concern was who among them was the greatest. Which of them would have the highest post in the kingdom of Jesus? They could hardly think anything beyond this, particularly the deep concerns and care of Jesus. Jesus was fully aware of all that was going on in their minds. He sat down and spoke just to the Twelve, his close friends and told them the type of leadership his followers ought to have. He then began his

corrective teaching by stating the basic principle of discipleship. He told them that if anyone wishes to be the first he should be last of all and the servant of all. Once again he threw an idea at them which was in total contradiction to everything they had ever been told. The type of authority he projected would be of a new type, never experienced by any one. He told them that true greatness is in being the servant or slave of all. The authority in his house has to be one of giving and of service. He did not scold them for their worldliness. But he corrected their leadership idea by telling them that if one wants a higher position he should be at the service of others.

Jesus exemplified his teaching on discipleship by putting a little child in their midst. He told them that if anyone who welcomes one of these children in his name, welcomes Jesus himself. The purpose of pointing to the child was not to promote some form of pious understanding that a disciple must be like a child in terms of innocence, openness and goodness. Generally when we think of a child it represents a person who has no power, no say, no influence; a person who can easily be controlled, abused or neglected and who has little redress. The point of making reference to the child was to draw their attention to the child's social status. In the culture of the time of Jesus children were considered to be at the lowest rung of the social ladder. This did not mean that they were not valued loved and cared for. It simply meant that the child starts out at the bottom. Jesus was teaching his disciples who were striving for status and fame that authentic discipleship moves in the opposite direction. Discipleship is about service, about giving up status, about moving down the ladder and not up. This is not the disciples wanted to hear. Jesus points to them that the adults seek security and in the process can become sly and hard. They are often afraid and fear abuses. Children on the other hand live in unruffled trust. Adults see things with an eye to its usefulness but the child meets a reality with simple acceptance.

The child about whom Jesus speaks is an image. Jesus uses this comparison to introduce the reality of his mission on earth: that of being the representative of the Father, his perfect Image, and the one whom the Father himself sends to speak to men in his name. So he who receives a little child in the name of Jesus is not receiving a child, but rather Jesus himself through the intermediary of that child. Certainly, the child is not really Jesus. But Jesus is truly one God with his Father: thus, when we receive Jesus, it is truly the Father whom we receive. We read in the Gospel of John that if a man loves Jesus, he will keep his word, and the Father will love him, and they will come to him and make their home with him. However there is something unique about the child. A child has novelty and vision. It sees all things afresh. It has the sense of joy and admiration. It loves without reservation.

Above all it is humble, helpless and very vulnerable. The child represents all those in our society who are powerless and easily manipulated, who are easily abused, neglected and marginalized. It represents the poor, the sick, the disabled, the elderly and the immigrants. Jesus calls his disciples to discard the old ideas of messiah deep in their mind and see the presence of Jesus in the eyes of a child with a new vision and with admiration and wonder.

In the Gospel of today Jesus invites us as he called his disciples to understand his person and mission. Through all his life, through everything that constitutes the very essence of his person, Jesus is the Christ, the one whom God chose to bring to the world the life-giving Spirit, the Spirit who is Lord and who gives Life, as we say in the Creed. As son of God he would live forever and give life to the world. When the disciples wanted the prime place in his Kingdom Jesus does not condemn the desire to be first. What Jesus condemns is the act of speaking and communicating this desire to others. For this desire can very well come from God himself. Jesus did indeed have the desire to be the first, for God wanted it to be so. But he did nothing against those who brought him down to the lowest rank, putting him on the same level as bandits and criminals. He then told them they have to be like a little child open to God and persons with new vision of life. Those who welcome Jesus would welcome the one who sent him namely the Father. Again those who welcome the disciples and followers of Jesus and listen to their message would be welcoming Christ. Through the intercession of Mary our Mother let us look for the new vision and new mission of service.

A man spoke with the Lord about heaven and hell. The Lord said to the man “come, I will show you hell.” They entered a room where a group of hungry people sat around a huge pot of cooking stew. Everyone in the room was starving. Each person held a spoon that reached the pot but each spoon had a handle so much longer than their own arms that it could not be used to get the stew into their own mouths. The suffering was terrible. “Come now, I will show you heaven” the Lord said. They entered a room identical to the first, the big pot of stew, the group of people and the same long-handled spoons. But here everyone was happy and well nourished. “I don’t understand” said the man. “Why is everyone happy here and miserable in the other room? Everything is the same.” “Here, said the Lord, they have learned to SERVE each other.”

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