

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B September 20, 2009

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

Charitable Words

Our readings this week are very similar to those from last week, and have a very similar message. Last week our first reading from the Old Testament was a prophecy of Christ's passion from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Today we have another prophecy of Christ's passion; this time from the Book of Wisdom.

Last week in our gospel we heard Jesus foretell His own passion to his disciples for the first time. And we heard how his disciples had trouble accepting this news; they were thinking like human beings, not as God does. This morning we heard Jesus plainly foretell His passion for the second time, and once again the disciples cannot understand. Once again they are thinking like human beings and not as God does. As they journey, they seek out personal glory and have a discussion about who among them is the greatest.

Last week, Jesus instructed His disciples: *“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it.”*

This morning Jesus instructs His disciples: *“If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.”*

Today we hear essentially the same message that we heard last week; that following Jesus means living and acting in ways that are the opposite of those encouraged by our society. We are called to humbly put others first; to serve and not be served.

Last week St. James taught us that our faith must be put into actions; that we need to be charitable. This week he teaches us to be charitable in our words as well. He warns us against envy and jealousy and selfish ambition that are the cause of conflicts and wars. He tells us that we can only have peace when we set these aside and ask God humbly for wisdom and those things that God knows will be good for us. We should not focus on trying to be the greatest in the eyes of men as the apostles did.

When we try to set ourselves up on a pedestal as being greater than others, we do it in two ways. We start by inflating ourselves, and then we tear down the others. We look inward in a non-constructive way and then we look outward in a non-constructive way.

When we seek to inflate ourselves, we emphasize all our positive traits and characteristics, but we ignore and deny all our faults and failings. We don't look inward honestly because we don't really want to expose the truth, sometimes even to ourselves. And this is destructive because we ignore our weaknesses and fail to address them; we do not grow and improve spiritually.

When we seek to tear down others to make ourselves look better by comparison, we can become judgmental. The Scriptures teach us that there is only one Judge. And, besides, we often don't have all the facts necessary to judge. We attended a church recently when we were out-of-town. At the beginning of Mass, the relatively young priest approached the altar and bowed; he didn't genuflect as called out in the rubrics of the Mass. I immediately noted this and questions stirred in my head about his orthodoxy. A short while later in his homily, the priest gave his congregation an update on his recovery

from his recent knee surgery. There was a very good reason he did not genuflect; and I was too quick to judge. Our criticisms and judgments of others cause conflict and are destructive to relationships. We need to look for the good in others, not the bad.

And so I encourage you to look inwardly and outwardly in a positive fashion. Look inwardly honestly, examine your conscience, determine those areas where you can improve and grow in your relationship with God and your neighbors. And then pray and ask God for help. Ask Him to give you what He knows you need, not simply what you want. This is a good kind of prayer.

Look inwardly and determine your strengths, your talents, your true skills, and the work hard to use them to the service of Christ and the gospel. Recognize them as the gifts from God that they are. Act in a spirit of service, not motivated by vanity, greed, or ego.

Look outwardly and look for the good in others. Be humble and build them up and encourage them. And when you approach people in this manner, they will be much more inclined to accept input from you on areas where they might need improvement or some changes in their lives. You can offer constructive advice in a charitable way, not as criticism. There is a place in St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians where he gives us direction on this subject: ***“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”*** (Eph. 4:29-32)

I think this is good advice for all of us to reflect upon. It is a good reminder to be charitable not just in our actions, but also in our words. Make sure your words are offered charitably and not with the intent to demean or belittle, to build up your own ego. Look first at your close relationships; with your spouse, with your brothers and sisters, with your parents and children. What are your motivations? Is your intention to educate and impart grace, or to show your superiority? I think many of us could learn to bite our tongues a little more often and say only those words that will benefit those we claim to love, not everything that makes us feel good.

Deacon Joe Hulway