

Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B
October 11, 2009

Readings: Wisdom 7:7-11; Hebrews 4:12-13; Mark 10:17-30

Sharpest of Two-Edged Swords

We have a lot of images of Jesus as we read through the Bible. We see Him portrayed, for example, as a shepherd, a bridegroom, a lamb, a rock, a vine, and as bread. But today we hear a bit of imagery that doesn't seem to fit with all the others; it has a violent nature to it. This morning we hear in our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews that Jesus, the Word of God, is the sharpest of two-edged swords. So much for being the gentle shepherd who guides us, or the loving bridegroom who takes care of His bride, the Church, or the innocent lamb who goes quietly to be slaughtered—sacrificed for our sins. Jesus as a sword reminds us that we need to fear the Lord; fear of the Lord is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is the sword that can cut through all our pretenses. He can quickly separate our actions from their intentions. We cannot hide from His penetrating vision of our souls. He not only sees what we are like on the outside; He knows how we look on the inside.

We need to be aware that God sees and knows all that we do, all of the time. It's not enough just to be good when others are around to see our actions. We need to strive to have clean hearts, to have good intentions for our actions even when no one else is there to see, because God sees what is in our hearts. He cannot be fooled.

He knows when we are lying, when we are scheming and hatching plots against others, when we are having impure thoughts or intentions—even when we don't carry them out. We often try to impress others that we are doing only good things. We often do good things because they are expected of us. But it is important to do good things for the right intentions—because we love God and love our neighbor. Otherwise we are probably serving a false God; we are putting some other reason for doing good, such as winning esteem, ahead of God Himself.

The rich young man in our gospel story was a good man. He claimed to have obeyed all the commandments since his youth. Jesus, however, calls him to be a great man. The sharp two-edged sword of Jesus cuts to the man's heart and reveals that his love of money is interfering with his ability to surrender his life. He obeys the commandments out of obligation, not necessarily out of love or faith. Jesus challenges him to set aside his false god of money and he will be rewarded with treasures in heaven; this will make him great in God's eyes.

In our gospel story the rich young man is contrasted by Jesus' disciples. In scripture, we often see their weaknesses and failings; we know that they do not always act perfectly as the young man claimed to do. But the disciples acted with good intentions; they surrendered their lives and families to follow Jesus. They maybe didn't always do good things, but they did great things. And Jesus tells them that they will receive much in return, that they will have eternal life.

So it's good to stop and reflect on whether we are more like the rich young man or like the disciples. Do we do good things for possibly the wrong intentions, or do we do great things because we love and trust the Lord? Do we have false gods that distract us

from turning over our lives completely to God? Do we obey the commandments simply out of sense of obligation or to impress other? Or do we act out of love for Christ even when no one is around to see? Why do you come to Mass on Sunday mornings? What stops you from lying, or stealing, or swearing, or cheating your neighbor, or being unfaithful to your marriage vows? Is it the fear of being caught, a disciplined obligation to follow the rules, or is it because doing bad things would offend God, a God that we love and do not want to hurt?

It's also a good time to stop and remind ourselves not to judge others. Unlike God, we do not wield a sharp two-edged sword that allows us to see what is in the hearts of others; we do not know their intentions. We see only what others allow us to see. Some that appear to be holy and follow all the commandments have hearts that are not pure. Some that appear to be sinners are fighting internal struggles, fighting temptations that we can't understand, trying to improve themselves because of their love of God. We cannot judge others intentions.

So, we should not try to impress others and we should try not to judge others. God is the only one that matters and He knows all of us as we truly are. Others can fool us, either for the bad or for the good. We can fool others. But no one can fool God.

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