

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

Wis 2:12, 17-20

Ps 54:3-4, 5, 6 and 8

Jas 3:16—4:3

Mk 9:30-37

Joseph A. Genito, O.S.A.

Passion is a strong driving force. We put ourselves heart and soul into our passions, and they are a clear indication of our priorities and values. The Gospel account today comes after the account of the Transfiguration and the healing of a boy possessed by a demon. Jesus was passing through Galilee where he was well known, but did not want anyone to know about it, the reading states. Teaching his disciples that he had to die and rise after three days, a similar reference to rising after his death as he had made after the Transfiguration, Jesus was trying to impart something that was counter to what his society expected and knew so well. The kings and leaders of his day would not be speaking of suffering and death, but of glory and triumph; they would not be seen in the company of the poor and powerless, but amid adoring crowds of people clamoring to serve them. His disciples may have heard the teaching, but apparently they weren't buying it, for their discussion about who was the greatest gives evidence that they were vying for a prestigious place with a gloriously triumphant figure, not a criminal hanging on a cross.

We can't fault the disciples for their humanity; they were products of their time and truly believed that God rewards the just and punishes the wicked. However, being just in the eyes of God and being rewarded by society did not often coincide. The reading from Wisdom points that out quite directly. Doing justice often lands a person in hot water with those who don't want to be inconvenienced. People want to get rid of the troublemakers who rail against injustices.

Jesus knew his disciples. They went quiet when he asked them what they were talking about because they were ashamed that they had not listened to him and taken his words seriously. And who could blame them? Jesus often spoke of glory, and they had just witnessed a glimpse of his glory. Why would they expect that suffering and death were a necessary part of the process?

Jesus placed a child in their midst, the symbol of simplicity and powerlessness, and proceeded to teach them yet again about the meaning of his words and actions. Himself having been born a poor child to a poor family in a poor town, Jesus illustrated the value and dignity of simply being human. Just being a child of God is value enough, not what one has or one's status. He used the child to exemplify the importance of doing what is just, not for rewards or renown, but because it is right. Serving others, doing what is right and just, is its own reward; serving a child who has nothing to give in return reinforces this notion strongly.

For Jesus to ask that his good works go unrewarded, indeed unnoticed, as he did not only by trying to journey through Galilee quietly, but also in many other circumstances when he asked the people he healed not to tell anyone, would fly in the face of the ambitious of any time. All those opportunities for glory and profit would be wasted if people didn't know about them. To the ambitious person this would be utter nonsense. Only a fool would not take advantage.

There is no hint of self-centeredness in the teachings and actions of Jesus; there is no room for unselfishness in the world of power and prestige. The disciples didn't quite get it.

Not that they didn't have many opportunities to get it, for every time Jesus encountered a person deemed worthless by his society, he was preaching the same message. Every time he engaged in conversation with a woman, a leper, a person crippled or deaf or possessed, he spoke loudly and clearly that his first priority was in the value of the person. He cured the illness, forgave the sin, but only after treating the person with compassion and respect first. How often did he remind people that their faith had saved them, and that the real healing was of their spirit. Jesus was preaching to anyone who would hear that this is the hallmark of ministry and leadership, to serve those who can give nothing in return, to lift up the brokenhearted, the despised, the shunned and to help them realize that they are loved for who they are, not for what they have or what they can offer.

The disciples eventually did listen; they eventually "got it" after the Resurrection. Their passions moved from jealousy and selfish ambition to the selflessness of their teacher and Lord. Our world, however, seems not to have embraced this idea of leadership and service, for the self-serving notion of leadership still fuels the passions of nations. War is rampant in our world, greed and other injustices abound. Those who speak of peace, of recognizing the inherent value of every human being, of trying to find common ground and ways to achieve understanding among all peoples are seen as fools. There's nothing to be gained from being selfless; doing what is just doesn't make you rich or famous.

Jesus exhorts us to listen to him today, just as he exhorted his disciples to learn from him when he placed the child in their midst. St. Augustine spoke of the true leader as one who walks alongside his people, not lording it over them. He used the imagery of being on the journey with his people, the leader shepherding his people as one among them, a fellow Christian. One of his most famous statements was from a sermon commemorating his ordination when he said, "For you, I am a bishop; with you I am a Christian." In a related sermon he made a similar statement: "We have been placed at the head and we are servants. We are in command, but only if we are useful." All of us are called to exercise this same attitude whenever we find ourselves in leadership, whether that be as leader of a family, a group, a parish, a city, a nation. The ultimate leader - Jesus - modeled this for us and showed us that it would not be easy. For him, the path to glory involved the cross, because his passion was for justice. He prevailed to rise in glory, but not in the eyes of those who didn't get it. May we learn from him to pursue justice passionately, and may all our actions witness to the same passion for life and dignity and respect that Jesus gave his life for.