

SEPTEMBER 23RD, 2018: TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

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

Today we have the second of Mark's three prediction/misunderstanding/clarification pericopes explaining what it means to die with Jesus. (Afraid we'll have to wait until the Twenty-ninth Sunday of the Year to learn Jesus' third way.) Though the disciples' misunderstanding is implicit in this narrative, we can easily reconstruct it from Jesus' clarification. Conveniently ignoring his command to die, his followers have been arguing over who's the group's head high honcho.

He begins by confronting them head on. "Anyone who wishes to be first, shall be the last of all and the servant of all." Then gives them an "audio-visual:" a child. "Putting his arms around it, he says, 'Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me.'"

Many confuse this particular "child passage" with the one in which Jesus commands we become like little children. Here, condemning church "cry-rooms," he says we're to accept little children, not imitate them. Those in the community, like children, who can give us practically nothing are the people we must value the highest. Given our culture, Jesus would probably go into one of our nursing homes, put his arms around an Alzheimer resident and say, "Whoever receives . . ."

The main problem many people found in the historical Jesus was his aggravating habit of turning everything upside down. Because he's convinced God is present, working effectively in everyone's life, then our everyday life is no longer business as usual. Life hasn't changed, but the way we approach and live it has.

The author of Wisdom encountered similar opposition centuries before Jesus' birth. He or she ran into a parallel problem in presenting the "just one" as a person everyone should imitate. There's simply too high a price to pay. Biblically "just" persons develop proper relationships with God and those around them. They're more concerned with building up the advantage others experience than in selfishly looking for their own advantage. In almost every culture they're "obnoxious" because they "set themselves against our doings." Instead of transforming the way we live, it's far easier to just get rid of the just persons in our midst. Dead people usually don't give us a guilt complex.

That's where James comes in. Obviously the community for which he writes has little in common with the ideal, loving communities we find in the first chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. Among other vices, the author's forced to confront "jealousy and selfish ambition" in some of the individuals reading his letter. Instead of being guided by the risen Jesus, they've simply given themselves over to the "passions that make war within their members." Even if they pray, they have no idea for what to pray. Instead of being open to others, they're trapped in their own selves.

The gospel Jesus has a community vision which he expects his followers to share; an unstratified society in which everyone is equal, no honorary titles, no one more important than anyone else. It's evident from the "structure" of our church that we Catholics haven't bought into Jesus' vision. Years ago it was fashionable to compare ourselves to General Motors or AT&T; efficient, task oriented, hierarchical structures. Some of this "formalism" changed at Vatican II, but it constantly creeps back in. A seminary classmate from Detroit mentioned that shortly after ordination he attended a clergy conference in which Cardinal Dearden, presuming the council had gotten rid of monsignors, asked for suggestions on how to reward priests who had done extraordinary work during their ministry.

Too bad that equalizing frame of mind didn't last – in Detroit or in Belleville. From today's gospel it's clear it mirrored Jesus' mentality on dying.

SEPTEMBER 30TH, 2018: TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Numbers 11:25-29 James 5:1-6 Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

One of the most difficult things for people of faith to acknowledge is that we can't put limits on God. It's impossible to set boundaries in which God can work. He/she can only go so far, no further. Today's first and third readings show how ridiculous it is to even attempt putting limits on an unlimited being.

Moses isn't foolish enough to restrict Yahweh in our Numbers pericope. Though Eldad and Medad are among the spirit-filled 70 elders, they miss the formal "installation" ceremony. Yet they're eventually heard prophesying alongside their 68 cohorts. Joshua, following recognized rules and regulations, wants to immediately stifle the pair. But Moses stops him. "Would that all the people of Yahweh were prophets," he says. "Would that Yahweh might bestow his spirit on them all." In other words, we should be expanding God's actions, not restricting them.

Jesus encounters a similar "restrictor" in our gospel passage: John. "We saw someone driving out demons in your name," he tells Jesus, "and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us." But instead of presenting John a gold star for snitching, Jesus cuts him down. "Do not prevent him. There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me." Then he teaches his followers how to approach such "grey" situations, "Whoever is not against us is for us." Obviously we follow a God who can work through anyone, any place, any time.

In a similar vein, the author of James reminds his readers that our God numbers the most unlikely people among his "righteous." According to traditional, biblical Jewish theology, the community's wealthy are the people most blessed by Yahweh. Yet those with riches are the individuals who most frequently break God's laws, especially in their relationship with the poor. One can't tell who's righteous and who isn't without a scorecard – Yahweh's scorecard. The problem is that it's a constantly changing scorecard. Just when we're certain we know who's in the game and who's sitting on the bench, God switches players.

That seems to be why the gospel Jesus continues his "cut-down" of John by pointing out the role "insignificant" people play in making God effectively present in our lives. "Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, amen, I say to you, will surely not lose his or her reward." Not only will those who actively work at making God's kingdom present in our world receive their reward, but that reward applies to anyone who gives even the slightest help to those engaged in such work.

Of course, the opposite is also true. "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better . . ." Contrary to popular belief, "little ones" in this context doesn't refer to physical children. It's simply one of the gospel Jesus' affectionate terms for his followers. Who would dare encourage someone to break faith with the risen Jesus? Can't imagine the consequences.

Nothing or no one should stop us from making Jesus' mentality our mentality, no matter how difficult that is to achieve. If we're not careful, we could end up in Gehenna.

Jesus doesn't seem to be referring to hell in this warning: most probably he's employing Gehenna's original meaning: the Jerusalem city dump. He presumes nothing's worse – not even physical handicaps -than living in a place chock full of worms and constant fires. If we're broadminded enough to accept Jesus' outlook on those around us, we'll actually live life to the fullest. After all, those who insist on limiting God eventually limit themselves at the same time.