

Sunday 25.09

Last Sunday we read from chapter 8 of Mark's Gospel when Jesus predicts his passion and death for the first time and rejects Peter's refusal to accept this bad news and even calls Peter Satan because he thinks as humans do and not as God does. Today we read from chapter 9 of Mark when Jesus for the second time predicts his future passion and death and the disciples again miss the boat, though this time less forcefully than Peter in the previous chapter. Here, we are told, "they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to question him."

But then we have the following scene in which Jesus, at the end of their journey together, and, it would seem, having been out of earshot of them during the journey, asks them what they were talking about on the way. And they are silent, because they are afraid to tell him that they had been discussing who was the most important among themselves. Now, since they were silent, we have to presume that in some way or other Jesus eventually found out what they had been talking about, because he now gives them a lesson in humility: "If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all the servant of all." Then he takes a child, puts the child before them, embraces the child and tells them: "Whoever receives

one child such as this one in my name, receives me; and whoever receives, receives not me but the One who sent me.” In other words, Jesus is teaching them that God himself is to be found not in the proud and mighty but in the smallest of the small, in a child. How consoling these words can be for those who work with children, and especially with children who are sick or abused or abandoned. They are handling God himself, Jesus tells them. How consoling for those like our catechists who devote themselves to the religious instruction of our children.

The “disconnect” in this Gospel scene between Jesus’ prediction of his passion and death and the disciples’ argument about which of them is the most important is startling. Here Jesus is looking towards defeat and death while they are looking for importance. One could also wonder about the maturity of these disciples. Only children explicitly argue about who is first. We adults do the same thing but in disguised ways, and we do so because we know that others will shoot us down if we are too explicit in our claims to be first. It is also interesting that the message of this Gospel passage is honored by the larger society in name if not always in substance. For everyone who strives to be first tries to present himself or herself as wishing to be so in order to serve others. Whether pope

or president, the office is always presented as one of service. And so should it be, but not simply in name but in fact.

Humility is a hard lesson to learn. By humility I mean putting oneself at the service of others and not claiming the first place for oneself. To be able to do that must be a gift given from on high because it has to overcome what seems to be the natural urge in all of us to assert ourselves, to make our mark, to be recognized as someone of importance and value, an urge which in part can also be defended by our faith which teaches us that we are important, that we are unique, that we are loved by God into life and destined for eternal life. We are important, and so it seems good and natural to use our gifts and accept the recognition that comes from using them.

Yes, yes, yes. But we have all had the experience of egos colliding, if not our own with someone else's, then two other egos whom we have watched slug it out. Not a pretty picture. That is the picture the second reading from James draws for us today: "Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder." For self-importance then ends in immoral conduct: war, greed, uncontrolled passions, and murder.

We can all recognize the difference between a healthy sense of self, of our God-given worth and importance, and a bloated ego, but it is often easier to distinguish between the two in others than in ourselves. Therefore, we have to pray for guidance and wisdom to be able to distinguish between the two in ourselves.

Ultimately—and this may sound cruel but I believe it is correct and in the end not cruel but curing—God has to empty us of ourselves to fill us with Himself. Not of our good selves, but of our selfish selves. For they stand in the way of our being open to God and His life and grace working in us.

So we pray that we may grow up, that we may not be part of that immature conversation in which the disciples engaged, arguing among themselves who was the greatest. There are better things to talk about than that. There is a better way to live, the way Jesus gives us today in this Gospel.