

Homily for the 25th Sunday, Sept. 20, 2009

Today we have the second of Jesus' three predictions of his passion and death in Mark's gospel. It will be helpful to look at the background for this passage in today's first reading.

The Wisdom of Solomon was probably compiled about 50 years before the birth of Jesus. It was influenced by the Greek thought that Alexander the Great had introduced into Jewish culture. The author of the book knew of the immortality of the human soul, which Hebrew thought had not recognized. With this knowledge, the author is able to solve an old problem in Jewish theology.

Jews did not believe in personal immortality. When you died, you lived on in the genes and in the memory of your descendents. Consequently, any reward you would receive from God had to take place in this life. Thus Jews believed that if you observed God's law you would prosper in this life. But this general law, true as it is, does not apply to every person. Job is a fairly sinless man, but he does not prosper in this life. The book of Ecclesiastes has similar difficulties with the old theology. In fact, we all know of people who are wonderfully hard-working, just, even devout, who do not prosper in this life.

The wicked persons in the second chapter of Wisdom operate out of this old theology. They say, "Since there is no afterlife, our lifetime in the passing of a shadow. Come, then, let us eat, drink and be merry. To afford all the joys we can grab, let us oppress the poor just man; let us neither spare the widow nor revere the old man. Let our might be our right, their weakness invites us." At this point, some good and decent Jew objects that they are acting against God's law which protects the weak. That leads us into today's passage: —R E A D. Notice how the wicked rely on the old covenant theology: If he is a just person, God will protect him, for the just must prosper in this life.

But Wisdom goes on: "Those were their thoughts but they were wrong: God made man to be imperishable, and so the souls of the just who die unjustly are in the hand of God. In heaven they are in peace, they shall shine and dart about as sparks through stubble. They shall judge nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord shall be their King forever." So the new theology is that if God does not reward the good in this life, he will reward them in the next.

Mark: This, then, is the theology which explains how sinless Jesus can be put to death by wicked men in this life, and be rewarded in the next. Jesus is the good prophet who accuses Romans and Jews of not giving to the poor, of not forgiving

over and over, of not returning good for evil. That is what God our Father does for us, and we as his children ought to do the same for one another. But the wicked and lazy reject his message. If they do not consciously exploit the poor and the weak, they at least want to be able to ignore them, but Jesus' prophetic words appeal to their conscience in a way they do not want to hear. And so they condemn him to a shameful death on the cross.

But God has the last word: he raises Jesus from the dead and seats him at His right hand in power where he will judge nations and rule over peoples.

The disciples do not understand this and are afraid to ask him about it. They want to be in positions of power, to be greatest in the kingdom which the messiah is establishing. They know this is wrong; that's why they are silent when Jesus asks them what they were talking about. So Jesus sits down, the teacher's position in Jewish culture, and tells them the one who serves is the greatest in God's reign. He takes a child, one of little account in both Hebrew and Greek tradition, and identifies himself and God with this least one.

What does this mean for us today?

At one time we may have had the opportunity and temptation to climb the ladder of success for our own pride, or for the power that brings security. But for the retired or those simply struggling to get by, the temptation to greatness is past.

But the desire to be served rather than serve others may still remain, often subtly. There have been times when I thought I was serving others, but in looking back I see I was serving my own sense of authority as a professor, even as a priest. And I think I have seen the same in other priests, and even in bishops.

Perhaps we have caught ourselves unwilling to protest the injustice of those in power for fear of losing what power we have. Perhaps we have not aided someone by our own legitimate authority for fear of making uncomfortable those who have power to promote us.

Perhaps our greatest unwillingness to serve is right here in our own parish. Some 20% of our parish does all the volunteer work of the parish. Some of them serve in three or four capacities. They are tired, their back aches, some of them drive twenty miles to perform their weekly service. But they push on because they have caught the spirit of Jesus' loving service, and they have the reward of really being part of Jesus' community of love. Are you among the 80% who presume you can coast on the backs of these few? So you really think Jesus has stopped

calling you to serve when he served to the end of his life? Ask yourself what you are doing for the reign of God here at St. Mary's, or here in Jefferson County.

Today's Ministry Fair is an opportunity for each one of you to hear the call of Christ who gave you the time and the talent to serve. Don't be like the disciples who were afraid to inquire, or, worse, like those who don't want to hear.

To all of us Jesus says love me, trust me, trust my way of service and I will care for you, now or hereafter. Carry your cross and you and your family will be at peace with yourselves and at peace with our world. By serving Him in others you will be greatest in the reign of God.