

Homily for 25 (B)

“If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all.”

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The section of Mark, chapter 9 that is appointed as today’s gospel makes an interesting choice. It is apparent from the beginning that something is missing – it begins ‘After leaving the mountain’. This is an editorial insertion, actually, by the compiler of the lectionary. And what mountain? Not any old mountain! The mountain in question is the high mountain where Jesus was transfigured in the presence of Peter and James and John. It was a sublime revelation of the Lord’s divinity and a preview of his resurrection, an experience that was intended to strengthen the apostles for what awaited them. And what awaits them is immediately evoked by Jesus as he tells them, for the second time, that

‘The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men; they will put him to death; and three days after he has been put to death he will rise again’.

So the inner group has seen the extraordinary theophany on the mountain, and the full group of disciples has been with Jesus as he travelled through Galilee teaching about his forthcoming suffering. At this awesome moment in human history at which the atoning death of the Christ, and his resurrection, is revealed to them – what do the disciples do? They bicker about which of them was the greatest, the most important, the boss.

Who knows why this started. Perhaps it was the recent incident in which Peter acclaimed Jesus as the Christ, perhaps it was to do with the inner group of three going up the mountain with Jesus? Who knows? In any case the bickering between Jesus’ followers continues to be recorded in the Acts of the Apostles as, for example, the Hellenists complain that the Hebrews are keeping all the alms for their own widows, as Peter and Paul bicker over the law against a background of continuing distrust of Paul’s conversion. As John Mark deserts Paul and Barnabas in Pamphylia, which causes Paul to reject him as a companion later, and so on. And all that is just the stuff that they were prepared to tell us about. No, men and women have always been inclined to abandon the highest principles in favour of naked self-interest, or even in deference to the most petty and shameful emotions of jealousy, envy, rancour, rivalry and ambition. And, as James tells us today, wherever you find jealousy and ambition, you find disharmony, and wicked things of every kind being done. Now, in the world, it is more understandable, among Christians, it is unforgiveable.

Jesus tries to help his disciples work their way past their more shameful instincts by a spectacularly direct piece of teaching. Does he use a parable, that needs interpreting? No. He says it plainly:

“If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all.”

And, in case that is too difficult for them, he draws them a picture, as it were.

“He then took a little child, set him in front of them, put his arms round him, and said to them, ‘Anyone who welcomes one of these little children in my name, welcomes me; and anyone who welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me’.”

He is trying to draw them out of themselves to see the needs of those around them and to push them into an understanding of what the apostolic life is all about. Has he not already said to them, in the passage that we heard last week?

“If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me...”

And yet, and yet, and yet... The disciples remain regrettably human, like us. They repeatedly miss the point, or don't listen, or choose not to understand, just like the rest of us. Their fundamental error is one of forgetting about God, forgetting to trust God, forgetting to listen to God. Jesus is revealed to them in his glory, they hear the voice of God Himself, and, shortly afterwards they are effectively saying, ‘Yeah, whatever. Now, let's be clear about this, I'm greater than you are.’ It's comical, or it would be if it were not exactly the sort of thing of which we are all capable.

Our readings today carry a clear message to us to keep ourselves firmly focused on God, on the commandments, on the presence of Christ in our lives. We are told to live for others, not for ourselves, because if we start to live as if the whole universe revolves around us, things go very badly wrong – in us and in our communities. We need our lives to be God-centred, and if that is a difficult idea, if we don't know how to find God, well, Jesus tells us how to do it. We can find God in the needs of our brothers and sisters, in the care of those around us. If we do that, we will be truly great in the sight of God.