

Twenty-fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Today for our Second Reading the Church presents for our reflection a beautiful passage from the Letter of Saint James (3:16 - 4:3). In it he speaks of 'the wisdom that comes down from above', and he contrasts two different ways of behaving. We would do well today to read through this passage again in our quiet time and to examine our lives in the light of its teaching.

We exist in time. We remember our past and we imagine what our future is likely to be. However, in fact, the only reality we have is the present. We share in the being of God for whom there is no past and no future. God holds us in his present and is pouring out love and grace upon us. We can choose to block God's grace. We can choose to live a distracted and dissipated life, out of touch with God and so out of touch with ourselves, with the consequence that we are out of touch with the real world. Today's readings plead with us not to live in this way but to welcome God's grace and live in accordance with the wisdom that comes to us from above.

James warns us that if our behaviour does not flow from the wisdom that comes from God we will find ourselves motivated by jealousy, ambition and self-indulgence. There is little real happiness in living like that. If, on the other hand, our hearts are open to that special wisdom which comes only from God, our love will be pure. That is to say, our love will be clear and evidently graced. We will also spread peace around us, and not disturbance. James speaks of such people as being kindly and considerate, full of compassion and keen to do good. The fruit of such a life is holiness.

In the Gospel Jesus tells the Twelve that the only ambition they should have is to do God's will by giving their lives in service of others. Jesus saw himself in the child, for he looked to God as his Father and knew that he was loved by God as a Son. If we open our hearts to the 'wisdom that comes down from above' we will share these same sentiments ourselves. Before all else we are sons and daughters of God whom he loves very much. Jesus wants us to treat everyone with the special sacredness that belongs to them as God's children. In so far as we live in this way our lives will be as described by Saint James.

Since true wisdom is the theme of today's readings, the first reading is taken from the Book of that name. The author makes the point that goodness and gentleness is no protection against being badly treated and he describes, in terms that ring true especially today, the awful way in which people, driven by insecurity, fear, jealousy and envy, can inflict pain on others. We are reminded of the terrible way in which Jesus was treated, and we are being warned to expect trials in our life. Life has its trials anyhow. Following Jesus enables us to bear these trials as he bore them, with a love that is pure, and with kindness, gentleness and compassion.

Hopefully you all have Bibles at home, but many of you may never have taken the time

to read the Book of Wisdom, also called 'The Wisdom of Solomon'. It is only 25 pages long, and to encourage you to take this opportunity to read it I thought I might introduce it to you briefly. The author contrasts two ways of living.

He speaks firstly of people who have failed to develop a vision of reality consistent with religious experience. He speaks of them being so locked into thinking of death as the end of living that they give way to a distracted life of self-seeking ambition, careless of the lasting value and the lasting effects of their behaviour, insensitive to the sacredness and the mystery of life, and blindly disregarding others in their scramble for passing comfort. Their passing is described as being:

'like a fleeting rumour,
like a ship that cuts through heaving waves –
leaving no trace to show where it has passed,
no wake from its keel in the waves.
Or like a bird flying through the air-leaving no proof of its passing;
it whips the light air with the stroke of its pinions,
tears it apart in its whirring rush,
drives its way onward with its sweeping wing,
and afterwards no sign is seen of its passage.
Or like an arrow shot at a mark,
the pierced air closing so quickly on itself,
there is no knowing which way the arrow has passed'(Wisdom 5:10-12).

He goes on to describe those who, by contrast, are sensitive to the sacred, to the religious dimension of reality, to the pervading mystery (1:7) that we call 'God'. Response to this pervading mystery finds expression in literature and the arts: all the arts, but particularly the art of living, the art of love. It is this art that Christians see expressed most perfectly in Christ. The author of the book of Wisdom saw it in the lives of those who were sensitive to the values expressed in the Jewish Law with its exceptionally high regard for social concern flowing from a sense of the presence of the divine at the heart of reality – the divine which at the same time transcends all that we experience or attempt to comprehend. He sees all enduring knowledge as being God's gift (7:15-22), and lays great stress on the incorruptibility of truth and so of the human spirit that serves truth. Humans do not create their own destiny; they are, as he says, 'saved by Wisdom'(9:18).

The author's religious conviction is expressed in his address to God: 'You do not neglect to make your presence felt in any time or place'(19:22). The opening lines in his work appeal to his readers to 'seek God with sincerity of heart'(1:1). How one makes sense of religious experience is at the same time obviously problematic. The author found in his community so many Jews who gave a notional assent to Judaism but who were living at variance with its religious insights. Today, there are so many Christians who do the same, and Moslems too. There are so many false images and false understandings of 'god',

understandings that fly in the face of reason and of genuine human values.

Each of us has to find his or her own way to journey in the consequent confusion, and we find ourselves walking along different paths, drawing on different traditions and treasuring different memories. I do not intend to say by this that everything is relative and that it does not matter which path we walk. I am simply highlighting the truth that the mystery whom we call 'God' does transcend all our definitions. In the final analysis the truly religious person is recognised by his or her unwillingness to close the door on the search for truth, unwillingness to be satisfied with distractions, unwillingness to neglect the sacred, and above all by his or her genuine respect for the meanings and the values that enrich human living.

Speaking of those who disdain the wisdom that comes from God, the author writes:

'Wretched are they who scorn wisdom:
their hope is void, their toil unavailing,
their achievements unprofitable'(3:11).

Of the final goal prepared by God for the genuinely religious person, the Book of Wisdom says:

'They are in the hands of God. . .
To the unenlightened they appeared to die,
their departure was regarded as a disaster,
their leaving us like an annihilation;
but they are at peace . . .
Those who trust in God will understand the truth,
those who are faithful will live with him in love;
for grace and mercy await them'(3:1-3,9).

You may not choose to make time to read the Book of Wisdom, but let us all spend some time today reflecting on our lives and praying for the wisdom that God is offering us to direct our lives in the most loving way, for it is that grace and that wisdom that we are being offered today.