

Readings for the 25th Sunday of the Year

FIRST READING: Wisdom 2:12, 17-20

A reading from the Book of Wisdom:

The wicked say: Let us beset the just one, because he is obnoxious to us; he sets himself against our doings, reproaches us for transgressions of the law and charges us with violations of our training. Let us see whether his words be true; let us find out what will happen to him. For if the just one be the son of God, God will defend him and deliver him from the hand of his foes. With revilement and torture let us put the just one to the test that we may have proof of his gentleness and try his patience. Let us condemn him to a shameful death; for according to his own words, God will take care of him.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 54:3-4, 5, 6-8

The Lord upholds my life.

O God, by your name save me, and by your might defend my cause. O God, hear my prayer; hearken to the words of my mouth.

The Lord upholds my life.

For the haughty men have risen up against me, the ruthless seek my life; they set not God before their eyes.

The Lord upholds my life.

Behold, God is my helper; the Lord sustains my life. Freely will I offer you sacrifice; I will praise your name, O Lord, for its goodness.

The Lord upholds my life.

SECOND READING: James 3:16-4:3

A reading from the Letter of Saint James:

Beloved: Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice. But the wisdom from above is first of all pure, then peaceable, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without inconstancy or insincerity. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace for those who cultivate peace. Where do the wars and where do the conflicts among you come from? Is it not from your passions that make war within your members? You covet but do not possess. You kill and envy but you cannot obtain; you fight and wage war. You do not possess because you do not ask. You ask but do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

The word of the Lord.

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark:

Jesus and his disciples left from there and began a journey through Galilee, but he did not wish anyone to know about it. He was teaching his disciples and telling them, "The Son of Man is to be handed over to men and they will kill him, and three days after his death the Son of Man will rise." But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to question him. They came to Capernaum and, once inside the house, he began to ask them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they remained silent. They had been discussing among themselves on the way who was the greatest. Then he sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all." Taking a child, he placed it in the their midst, and putting his arms around it, he said to them, "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."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 25th Sunday of the Year

The book of Wisdom is part of the Septuagint. The Septuagint was the scriptures for the Jews of the Diaspora and written in Greek not Hebrew. When I was in grammar school, I had learned of the ten lost tribes of Israel. They were never lost; they merely settled in the lands into which they were dispersed. Because of the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions, Judaism became a world religion. The translation of the bible from Hebrew into Greek was for people living outside of Palestine.

From our Christian perspective, today's passage speaks directly of the mission of Jesus. Jesus suffered and died on the cross. He was innocent, but executed as a criminal in a shameful death. God vindicated Jesus with his resurrection. We can hear his story predicted in this prophetic passage. Yet, Wisdom's author and those who read or heard the book's message understood it in a different light.

The people were living outside of the Promised Land. They lived in the midst of pagan people. Unlike life in Israel and Judah, they were a minority. There was always the pressure to conform to a pagan society. To intermingle and secularize was a great temptation. This was the milieu of this story. Jewish people faced the challenge of being faithful to the covenant with God. The notion of the just one is different from our just one, Jesus. The just one remained faithful to Mosaic Law, thus maintaining a personal, covenantal relationship with God.

We believe in Jesus, God's only begotten son. The people of the Diaspora did not. To be God's son, or God's child, was one faithful to God and the covenant. Their faithful witness showed their close and intimate relationship. Justice was living a faithful life amid pagans. This was not easy then. It is not always easy now. Anti-Semitism is not a modern phenomenon. The wicked may not be fellow Jews but the wider pagan societies that surrounded God's people. I maintain that to understand this passage fully, the context of the times that produced them must be a consideration. From this perspective, this passage is about the Diaspora itself and is a presage to the Holocaust. The senseless violence and cruelty may be directed at the whole people of God and not just a single individual.

The late Catholic scripture scholar, Raymond Brown wrote a book, "The Churches the Apostles Left Behind. It was a forensic examination of the epistles that built an image of the early Christian communities. The issues the authors raised reflected the lives, needs and behavior of those given Churches. It was like reading a biblical CSI. We have a tendency to view the early Church as an ideal time of Christianity. They were nearer to Jesus in time than we. In reality, they were as human as are we. Our capacity for sin does not surpass theirs. Jealousy, division, stubbornness, and self-centeredness were their characteristics too.

James' words challenged them as much as they challenge us. Issues of prayer and witness were just as part of their lives as they are part of ours. In living a Christian life, we face the responsibility to work for the good of the community as did they. Ambition and envy may be very human, but seeking the presence of Christ in others is a way to remain faithful. Working together for justice still can lead to peace, if not for the whole community, for ourselves. The challenge of James' message, today, can heal the division, distance and animosity we find among us. Seek Christ in all events, experiences and people. Jesus is there.

Last week Jesus spoke of his true mission, the cross, to his disciples for the first time. Their response was total denial. This week Jesus has brought it up again, a second time. This time the disciples changed the subject. Instead of denial, they used diversion as a defense. They cannot yet face the truth of Jesus' mission. Jesus, in response to their childish posturing did what he did last week too. He implied that they, too, may face a similar mission. Who's the greatest in the Kingdom of God? It's Jesus who suffered and died the death of a criminal.

We don't always hear Jesus' implications in this passage. For us, children are most important to us. We see in them futures and possibilities that we may never have. In Jesus' day they had the lowest status within society. In becoming like a child, an adult would effectively humiliate one's self. Look at their childish bickering. That's effectively what they did. Status is not what Jesus saw or considered important. It was the person, their faith and relationship to him. The twelve don't seem to get Jesus' point as well as his mission. They live in a world before the Cross, Resurrection and Pentecost. Their comprehension of this will only come when they witness these events happen.

People will always do wicked things. War, conflict and division are endemic to our one human race. Through faith and fidelity, both God's gifts, God upheld the people in Diaspora. The Christian community of James' epistle heard and then witnessed to Jesus' mission. The twelve gave their lives to God's people in faith. We live and worship in their same faith. As God upheld them, God upholds us. We continue to strive for the Kingdom of God in the greatness of Christ.

May the lord uphold us as we witness to Christ.

James D. Beath
September 18-19, 2021