

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B
Wisdom 2:12, 17-20
Psalm 54:3-4, 5, 6, and 8
James 3:16-4:3
Mark 9:30-37
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Jesus has taken his disciples up into the mountains. His plan is to get them off on their own, in order to explain to them in the plainest possible words what is about to happen to him. There are no parables this time -- no hidden meanings -- just this: "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." Period. The disciples' response to this news is surprising. We read: "they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to question him." How could they fail to understand such a straightforward statement? And if they didn't understand, why were they afraid to ask Jesus to explain? Perhaps they didn't want to understand. Faced with so cataclysmic a message, they may have preferred ignorance. They may have been like the spouse of a soldier in wartime, who refuses to open a telegram, for fear of the news it might contain. They simply didn't want to know.

Then Jesus leads the disciples down from the mountains, back to Peter's house on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. We can imagine Jesus walking a little ahead of the group during the journey, to give them the opportunity to absorb, and discuss among themselves, the news he has given them. And, in fact, there *is* a good deal of animated discussion among the disciples as they walk. As soon as the group has entered

Peter's house, Jesus turns to them and asks, "What were you discussing on the way home?" In our *first* reading, the wicked propose to put the son of God to the test. They will try his patience in order to prove his gentleness. Now Jesus' patience is being tested, for instead of discussing the message he has given them, the disciples have spent their time on the road, arguing about which of them is most important.

But again, perhaps we can understand the disciples' behaviour. The last thing they want is to discuss news that they are doing their best not to understand. So what they need, is a subject to distract them. And since, unlike modern men, they can't pass the time discussing sports, they seize instead upon another inexhaustible topic: which of them is greatest. We are reminded immediately of our second reading, in which James speaks of the jealousy and strife that afflict his community. James puts the disputes down to inner cravings. "You envy," he tells them, "and you cannot acquire, so you quarrel and fight."

Jesus knows better than to try to extinguish in his disciples the very human instinct to compete with one another, so instead, he shows them a way to redirect their competitiveness, so that it serves to build up the Kingdom of God, instead of tearing it down. He tells them, "If anyone wishes to rank first, he must remain the last one of all and the servant of all." If human beings would only throw themselves wholeheartedly into *this* competition, the world would be transformed.

To illustrate his point, Jesus stands a little child in their midst and puts his arms around him or her. Then he says, "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." According to tradition, whoever receives an emissary is receiving the one who sent the emissary.

Jesus is saying that a child is *his* emissary, and that he himself is the Father's emissary. Why a child? Because a child is entirely lacking in status and influence. On the face of it there is nothing to be gained from showing kindness to a child. Hospitality toward an adult might be motivated by hope of reward. It could be a case of playing the old competitive game by the old rules. But to welcome a powerless child, who has nothing to offer in return, for the sake of Christ, is to play the game by God's rules. For what is Christ's Passion, the very Passion that he describes in our Gospel today, but an instance of someone who has nothing to gain, sacrificing himself for others, who have nothing to offer in return? Nothing we could do could earn Christ's sacrifice, or repay him for it. We are simply children that he rescued out of love -- living evidence that Jesus practiced what he preached.