

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: September 22, 2024

I have recently read an article about Jim Hensen, creator of the Muppets. While this series of wonderful characters has taught a lot to children, the author of the article says that Hensen had a profound theology in his characters. I thought of this after reading today's scriptures. Kermit the frog said that it was not easy being green. Well, the scriptures today show it is not easy to be human. We are forever trying to prove ourselves, be strong and comfortable in who we are and not let anyone else get under our skin. Questions of identity, meaning, belonging, competence, acceptance, security, bug us throughout our lives. If I don't speak for you, I surely do speak for myself.

First, let's consider the reading from the Book of Wisdom. If this doesn't echo the state of public relations in our country, I don't know what does. The reading contrasts the ways of the righteous and the evil. "Let us lie in wait for the righteous one, who makes life inconvenient to us and opposes our actions, who reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses of sins against our training ... Let us test him with insult and torture, so that we may find how gentle he is..." A little dramatic, perhaps, but rather familiar to what we are hearing these days.

Saint James is not much more inspiring, as he says, "Where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind... These conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?" James is counseling wisdom which, he says, is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. Yes, there are people like that too.

All this is background for our gospel story which challenges us to really be human. We meet Jesus and his disciples passing through Galilee. The context is important. This story follows the one we heard last Sunday, the mid-point and hinge of Mark's gospel where Jesus makes his first prediction of his passion and death. You remember Peter trying to deny that this could be true. Nobody likes to hear a prophetic voice that might move us to change. Thus the disciples avoid Jesus' words getting inside of them. What better way to do it than start an argument among themselves. They changed the subject from suffering to power. They let him go ahead of them, trying to avoid following his ideas or sharing his destiny. They walked behind, but did not follow. Perhaps they were afraid to face the reality of Jesus' words. Jesus probably hears them talk behind him but does not interfere.

Finally, they are indoors in the house in Capernaum. Now he puts them on the spot, "What were you arguing about on the way?" Nobody responds. They are silent since they know they have been caught red-handed. For they had been arguing among themselves who was the greatest among them. There is no escape. Jesus gently reminds them that the one who wishes to be first must be the last of all and servant of all. Then he takes a little child on his lap and holds it as a model of what they ought to be.

All the rest of the gospel is a further teaching, in words and example, of what it means to follow Jesus and fulfil our humanity. He promises no easy way. In fact, he promises suffering if they follow him completely. Jesus asks them to emulate a defenseless little child.

Throughout his teachings, Jesus upends expectations. What society and culture promote, he often challenges. He counseled deference to the legitimate political authority, a Roman imperial power at the time. But he taught his followers a different way to think and to act. His teaching challenges us today to examine our attitudes and actions. American Catholics, who have largely originally been immigrants speaking different languages and practicing a different culture, strove hard to be accepted into American life. Now that they have been assimilated into American culture, we have to wonder whether we have sold out on the gospel. Have we accepted the violence, the greed, the individualism so prevalent in our times?

Last week Pope Francis returned from two weeks in visiting four countries in Oceania. He chose to go to small, poor places on the periphery of world power. The secular media had little coverage of his journey for there was little news for them. In one of these countries, when his plane landed, the Queen and Cardinal of the local church remained in the building while scads of poorer workers of the airport all went out to greet the Pope at his plane. Vatican Security officials were nervous. He welcomed all the ordinary people. He was showing, as he often has, that the church should be a church of the poor. I think the Pope is trying to reform the Church but maybe not in the ways we expect. Power and glamor are put aside. Francis shows us the way, walking before us and showing us the ways of simplicity, love, and trust in God that little children often display.

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