

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Wisdom 2:12, 17-20

Ps 53

James 3:16-4:3

Mark 9:30-37

When I was the age of our Confirmation candidates, the world was going through a lot of changes, and there was a lot of talk about the so-called “New World Order”. The old Soviet Union was falling apart, the Cold War was coming to an end, and the established political, military and economic alliances throughout the world were all being reshaped. However, these changes—significant though they were—are but a ripple in the ocean of world history compared with the New World Order that was unleashed 2,000 years ago.

Through his teaching and example, our Lord Jesus completely turned conventional-wisdom—and human history—upside-down. His New World Order he called “the Kingdom of God,” and it is one in which:

- Greatness comes from being the least;
- The first will be last and the last first;
- If you want to receive you must give;
- If you want to live you must die to yourself.

Now, in the Gospel passage we’ve just heard, I don’t know who to feel sorry for the most! I feel sorry for Jesus, because here he is, with his closest group of friends who he has been training for a couple of years, and he’s about to turn and make his way to Jerusalem where he knows it’s all going to come to a head. In other words, he’s running out of time – he needs his core group of followers to start to get with the program, and what are they doing? They’re still playing the same old game of “Who’s Numero Uno?” – arguing amongst themselves about who is the greatest. I mean, I’d forgive our Lord if he got a little exasperated here!

On the other hand, I also feel sorry for the disciples, because they have no idea what Jesus is on about, and really there is no reason to expect that they should. Jesus is preaching a message that is entirely counter-cultural, counter-intuitive, and unprecedented in human history. The disciples are doing their best to be faithful followers—they’ve given up everything to be by his side—but they have no reference point for even beginning to make sense of what Jesus is on about. It is like he is reinventing how to do “the human thing” on the spot, and it goes against everything they think they know.

To illustrate the point, Jesus brings a small child into their midst. Now this is not a case of “aren’t kids cute, let’s be nice to kids!” Both of those statements are of course true. However, Jesus’ gesture was intended to shock his disciples, because a child was a prime example of powerlessness, and yet Jesus both identifies with them and asks his followers to identify with them.

Elsewhere Jesus says to his followers: “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” Now, again, this may seem rather counter-intuitive, especially for our Confirmation candidates who are on the cusp of leaving childhood behind and preparing themselves for their teenage years and adulthood after that. So what is Jesus getting at here?

As some of you know, prior to entering seminary I worked with children for several years, both hosting birthday parties and working at Scitech. And during this time, I saw ample evidence of the fact that children aren’t angels! Children are perfectly capable of lying, and cheating, and generally being as self-centred as any of us. But for the most part they *do* have one major advantage over most grown-ups, which I suspect is part of what Jesus was getting at. What advantage do they have? *Their conspicuous lack of cynicism.*

Most young children have not yet had their ability for spontaneous enthusiasm beaten out of them by life’s sufferings or peer-pressure. They can go from shedding tears to shrieking with delight in a matter of seconds, and they aren’t yet so self-conscious as to worry that shrieking with delight might be considered uncool. Furthermore, because they’re experiencing many things in life for the first time, most children have an appreciation for mystery and wonder that many of us start to lose as we get older. It’s not that life gets any less mysterious or wonderful as we get older, we just tend to think that we have things figured out, or at least we like to pretend we do.

Now, of course, on one level we adults do generally have things figured out a lot more than children, and we are a lot more independent. But in the grander scheme of things, this is only a surface knowledge and independence that we enjoy. As Christ and the saints show us, the closer we get to God, the more we realise how little we actually know about anything that really matters, and the more we realise just how dependent we are on God for everything.

So I would say to our young friends who are preparing for their Confirmation, that even as you make your way into the world of adulthood over the coming years, taking on assorted responsibilities that will require your serious attention, make sure that in the process you don’t throw out your capacity for *enthusiasm, delight, and wonder* – especially when it comes to the things of God.

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There’s a stereotype that our Catholic faith is something rigid and puritanical, but anyone who takes it seriously knows this is not true. Ours is an enchanted religion, drenched in a timeless landscape of saints and angels; pilgrimages and processions; fasts and feasts; sweeping cathedrals and supernatural liturgy. Our humble lives, when touched by grace, become what some have called “an adventure in fidelity”—an adventure in faithfulness—wherein we lowly things of clay and earth, against all expectations, are invited into an intimate encounter with the Lord and God of all

creation. Moreover, within our faith, even the *trials* and *tribulations* of our human existence become part of a spiritual drama of cosmic significance, as they become united with the mysteries of Christ's death and Resurrection.

The child-like powerlessness that Jesus alluded to in the Gospel was merely a prelude to the ultimate powerlessness that he would exhibit on the Cross, wherein our Lord and Master would forgo control over his very life, in obedience to the Father. Christ's New World Order—his Kingdom—clashed head-on with the “Established World Order” in the great showdown at Calvary, and while it mightn't look like it at first glance, on the Cross our Lord won a decisive victory for all time.

The rest of human history is in some ways just a postscript to this most terrifying and wonderful series of events. The light of the risen Christ has spread throughout the world, undermining the Established World Order both in history and within our own hearts. And through our Confirmation, Christ calls us to share in his work of shining the light of his Good News upon a world shrouded in darkness.

The task is not small. We are being asked to counter the world's hardened cynicism with humble faith. We are being asked to counter the world's weary despair with Easter hope. We are being asked to counter the world's false promises with Gospel truth. And we are being asked to counter the world's cruel nastiness with Christian love.

Yet we are not alone. We have each other; we have the saints and angels; we have the support of the Sacraments. Most of all, we have the Person of Christ, whom—through the working of the Holy Spirit—we will encounter once more in this morning's/evening's Eucharist. And so, as we enter into this Mass, and once more have the privilege of offering the Lord the worship that is his due, may we be innocent enough to *wonder* and *delight* in the presence of our crucified and risen Lord. And may this delight stir our souls, transform our lives, and lead us into joyful service.