

The Twenty-fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Wisdom 2:12, 17-20
<i>Response</i>	The Lord upholds my life.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 54:3-4, 5, 6, 8
<i>Second Reading</i>	James 3:16-4:3
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	God has called us through the Gospel to possess the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 9:30-37

The Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B brings us to the second passion prediction of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. So we fast-forward here from Mark 8 to Mark 9:30-37. As I mentioned in a previous video, there are three passion predictions that structure the second part of Mark's gospel and this is the second of that series. In Mark 9:30 we read:

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he would not have any one know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise." But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him. And they came to Caper'na-um; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they were silent; for on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve; and he said to them, "If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And he took a child, and put him in the midst of them; and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever

receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."¹

So that's the gospel for today — again, a relatively short passage. We'll try to highlight a few elements from it that are worth noticing. Number one, notice Jesus continues his ministry of secrecy and keeping a low profile, the so-called messianic secret from the Gospel of Mark. So he's traveling through Galilee here but he doesn't want anyone to know about it, right. Second, as he's doing that he's teaching the disciples, he's beginning to reveal to them the fact that not only is he the Messiah, the Son of Man from the Book of Daniel, who is depicted in a glorious vision of, you know, coming on the clouds of heaven, receiving the everlasting kingdom, he's also the suffering Son of Man who's going to be persecuted, who's going to be handed over, who's going to be killed, but who after dying on the third day will rise again. Notice once again that we call it the passion prediction but we really should call it the passion and resurrection predictions because in each case Jesus never just says I'm going to die and leaves it there, he always links passion and resurrection. He always links the crucifixion and the glory of Easter morning and Easter Sunday.

But notice what else it says here, a third element, it says the disciples did not understand the saying and they were afraid to ask him. So what does that mean? Well you might recall from previous videos that when Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man, it's a kind of a riddle, because he's speaking about himself in the third person, which is unusual, and he's also speaking about himself in the third person using an expression from the Old Testament that was polyvalent, that had more than one meaning. So Son of Man, without a definite article, can just mean a human being in the Old Testament, like in Psalm 8, you know, the Son of Man... who is the Son of Man that you are mindful of him...literally is a prayer to God meaning what are human beings that you care about us. So Son of Man can just mean human being, but the Son of Man in the specific context of Daniel 7, the Book of Daniel, is a reference to this heavenly King who comes on the clouds and receives the everlasting kingdom of God, and who was interpreted by ancient

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

interpreters, Jesus being one of them, as the Messiah, right, the future King of Israel who would receive the everlasting kingdom at the time of salvation.

So when Jesus says the Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men it's a bit of a riddle, it's a bit of a parable. Is he referring to himself? Yes. Okay, if he's referring to himself, why does he call himself the Son of Man, because in the Book of Daniel the Son of Man is this heavenly being who's being received into glory, not being crucified on a cross? So there's a kind of paradox here. Jesus is taking an image of messianic glory from the Old Testament Book of Daniel and uniting it to an image of suffering and death in the prediction of his passion. So the disciples kind of walk away from this puzzle, they don't understand exactly what he's saying and they're afraid to ask him, I think you can infer here, probably because they recognize that in some sense he's talking about himself but they're afraid to get into the details of that because that's an ominous prediction, especially if you are a student of the Messiah. If you're a student of the master and he's saying that he's going to be killed, one of the things that might arise or one of the things that might bring up in you is fear that you too might get caught up in the dragnet and be put to death, especially if your teacher in this place, in this situation, is going around Galilee in secret, right. Is he already a wanted man? Are people out to get him? And if they're out to get him, are they out to get you too? I mean that might be some of the psychology that's taking place in the minds and hearts of the disciples as they hear his words about the passion. You can at the very least see in the next verses that, whether they understand his passion and death or not, they certainly don't understand his teachings on discipleship and taking up the cross that we just looked at in a previous Sunday, because they're on the road together and disputing about who is the greatest. So they're thinking and asking questions about who is the greatest among them and so when he asked them what were you discussing on the way there, they don't want to tell him that they were debating as to who was the greatest of the 12.

So he takes their lack of understanding, he takes their failure to see the role that suffering and humility plays in discipleship, and he uses it as a teaching opportunity to show them a little bit more about the mystery of discipleship. In this case it says he sat down, he called the 12 and says if anyone would be first he must be the last of all and the servant of all. So let's pause there. What does that mean,

the last of all and the servant of all? Well the Greek word there for servant is *diakonos*, right, we actually get the word deacon from this. And even if you look at the level of holy orders today, although the deacon is a part, the deacon is one of the levels of the sacrament of holy orders and is therefore a holy and dignified office, it also is the lowest of the three levels of orders. All the way back in the Book of Acts the deacons are appointed by the apostles to engage in ministry to the widows, right, and to do some of what we might call the more menial activities in the church. While the apostles are out preaching the word of God and calling people to repentance, the deacons are performing lowly acts of charity and of service to the community, right, not the kind of fame and glory that you might associate with Paul the apostle or something like that. So Jesus takes this word *diakonos* and says, in other words, if you want to be the greatest you actually need to be the deacon of all, the servant of all, the minister of all. So you need to seek the lower place if you actually want to be higher, if you want to be exalted.

With that in mind, Jesus uses an example to illustrate what he's saying. It says he takes a child, puts him in the midst of the 12, and taking the child in his arm says to them, whoever receives a child in my name receives me and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. So what is this about? Well in ancient culture, unlike today, children were not put up on a pedestal. Why did I say not like today? Well today sometimes you'll see, like in American culture, almost kind of a worship of children as if family life should revolve entirely around the children. You'll see sometimes, at least at the store, I've sometimes seen situations where it seems like the children are leading the parents rather than the parents leading the children. In ancient culture it wasn't like that, children were virtual nobodies. They were not honored, they were part and parcel of society. There was abuse of children, there was children put into slavery, they had no power. They were, in a sense, some of the weakest and most powerless members of ancient society. So as the apostles are debating with one another about who has the highest place, who has the most honor, who has the most power, Jesus takes a little child, right, and puts it in front of them to say to them whoever receives someone like this, right, who is powerless, who is humble, who is small, actually receives me, and whoever receives me, receives him who sent me. Now this a powerful, powerful saying when you think about it. Who is it that sent Jesus? Well it's God the Father, right. So in a sense, mysteriously, Jesus is linking God the Father and himself with the

humility and the littleness of a child. Now that's another one of these riddles, it's a paradox, and you'll see Jesus use it elsewhere in the Gospel of Mark, like in Mark 10:45 he says, "the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." Again this is one of the tasks that children would perform, the task of servants, right. They would do menial labor, they would do menial activities, to get the child to do those things for the adults. So what Jesus is saying is I'm like a little child, I'm taking the lowest place as the servant of all, right, and it's precisely as servant of all that I will reveal my identity, my dignity, my messianic identity as the Son of Man, as the suffering servant.

Alright, so that's the basic thrust of the gospel here. It's basically another way of illustrating his passion. So think about in the previous Sunday, we saw he used the image of taking up a cross and following him to imitate or to illustrate the kind of suffering that he was going to endure in his passion, death, and resurrection. Now he takes a child to illustrate the kind of humility that he's going to embody in his passion, and his death, and his resurrection. He's going to be small, he's going to be powerless, and it's precisely through his apparent powerlessness that he will actually conquer Satan, conquer death, and then reign as king, and the disciples do not get this yet. They're still thinking about the kingdom in terms of earthly power, in terms of earthly prestige, and in terms of earthly hierarchy and earthly honor. So the image of the child is meant to kind of turn that on it's head.

Okay, with all that in mind then, what about the Old Testament reading for today? Well if we go back to the Old Testament, this is one of those occasions where the Old Testament reading is from a distinctively Catholic book of the Old Testament, one of my favorite books in the Old Testament, we've mentioned it before, the Wisdom of Solomon. In Wisdom 2, it's fascinating, there's a mysterious text about a suffering righteous man, a suffering servant, who isn't just called a servant but who is called the Son of God. And this text has been interpreted since ancient times as a kind of prophecy of the Messiah, a prophecy of Christ. So let's look at it together. In Wisdom of Solomon 2:12 we read these words. These are wicked people speaking:

"Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law,

and accuses us of sins against our training. Let us see if his words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of his life; for if the righteous man is God's son, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries. Let us test him with insult and torture, that we may find out how gentle he is, and make trial of his forbearance. Let us condemn him to a shameful death, for, according to what he says, he will be protected.”

Alright, so what's that about? This is an interesting passage. The context of this discussion here, many scholars actually think, is actually a reflection on the figure that we see in the prophecies of Isaiah, the suffering servant. So most people interpret this as a kind of development of the theme of the suffering servant in the Old Testament. What we have here is a righteous person who calls himself the Son of God and against whom the wicked people of his day gather together and plot against him, not just to persecute him or to isolate him but to actually kill him, in order to, so to speak, test his identity. If he's really the Son of God then God will deliver him. So the reason that the church has chosen this prophecy from the Old Testament, from the Wisdom of Solomon, for the first reading today is that this is one of the most famous passion predictions from the Old Testament. Unfortunately the lectionary in this regard doesn't give us the whole chapter but I would encourage you, if you want, to go back to read all of chapter 2 and you'll see that the description of this suffering righteous man in the Book of Wisdom is strikingly similar to what we see of Christ in the New Testament. The most important part here is that the righteous man calls himself God's Son.

The reason that's so critical is that in the Old Testament, Son of God is a term that gets applied to the Angels as a group, it gets applied to Israel as a group, they are the Sons of God, but whenever it's applied to an individual it's exclusively applied to the King of Israel, to David. You might recall that in 2 Samuel 7, God tells David that his heir to the throne will be the Son of God. He says I will be a father to him and he will be my son. That's in 2 Samuel 7:14. So when the Wisdom of Solomon uses the language of a suffering righteous Son of God, it's also a messianic context. So this is about a coming Messiah who's going to suffer, who's going to be persecuted, and who's going to die. And yet as we'll see, as Jesus will say to the apostles, God will raise him up after his death.

Okay, with that in mind, what about the Responsorial Psalm for today? This is continuing a theme we've seen elsewhere in the readings for Year B with the Gospel of Mark, in which the church has frequently chosen one of the Psalms of vindication, where the psalmist is suffering, where the psalmist is undergoing some kind of trial but then declares that he's going to be vindicated by God. Those Psalms the church has been giving us as we ponder the mystery of Jesus' suffering and death in a sense as we move toward the cross in the Gospel of Mark. Some scholars have actually called the Gospel of Mark a passion narrative with an extended introduction. I think that's an exaggeration. There's a lot going on in Mark that isn't just about the passion, but there's a grain of truth in that, in that we see once you hit chapter 8 in Mark's gospel, Jesus has his eyes firmly set on Jerusalem and on his passion and on his death, and in the lectionary the church kind of follows that movement by focusing on these moments of the passion predictions. So in accompanying that, the church gives us Psalm 54, which is attributed to David and it's actually set in the heading of the Psalm, it says, "A Maskil of David, when the Ziphites went and told Saul, 'David is hiding among us.' So this is a song that is actually set when David, the anointed one, the Messiah, the king, was being pursued, he was being persecuted by King Saul. So the psalmist says this, I'll just read the first couple of verses here:

Save me, O God, by thy name,
and vindicate me by thy might.
Hear my prayer, O God;
give ear to the words of my mouth.
For insolent men have risen against me,
ruthless men seek my life;
they do not set God before them. [Selah]
Behold, God is my helper;
the Lord is the upholder of my life.
He will requite my enemies with evil;
in thy faithfulness put an end to them.

And then look what the psalmist says here:

With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to thee;
I will give thanks to thy name, O LORD, for it is good.

So what's going on here? It's fascinating, in the context of the Psalm, David is being persecuted, right, unto death but his response to the persecution is two-fold. It's not that he trusts God, it's that he also offers a sacrifice of Thanksgiving even in the midst of his suffering, even in the midst of being persecuted, even in the midst of being attacked and having attempts on his life being made by Saul and his men. So what that shows us is a kind of prefiguration of Christ, that when Christ is on the cusp of his passion and death, right, in Mark 14, the night of the Last Supper, what is he going to do? He's going to institute the Eucharist, and what does Eucharist mean in Greek? Thanksgiving. So I don't know about you but if I was about to be betrayed, falsely accused, whipped, scourged, put to death on a cross, my first reaction, my natural reaction, is not going to be to give thanks, it's going to be fear, it's going to be terror, it's going to be horror. And yet Christ, like David before him, trusts in his father and so he's going to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving, precisely as an act of trust. He's giving thanks in advance for the fact that although he's going to suffer, God will deliver him in the resurrection on the third day.

Alright, so in closing then, what can we learn from this passage from the living tradition? In this case I've actually chosen an Eastern writer from the Middle Ages that you might not have heard about. He's not a very popular writer, he's considered a Saint in the Orthodox Churches. His name is Theophylact. He was a deacon in Constantinople in the Eleventh Century and he wrote a number of commentaries on the gospels that are really valuable witnesses to what Christians in the Byzantine East were teaching and thinking and believing in the Middle Ages. A lot of times we learn from St. Thomas Aquinas, you know, about the Middle Ages in the West but what about in the East? In this case I've given you a commentary from his Eleventh Century writing on the Gospel of Mark. This is what Theophylact says on this particular passage for this Sunday, he says:

“Now the disciples still saw things from a very human point of view, and they had been quarrelling amongst themselves about which of them was the greatest and the most esteemed by Christ. Yet the Lord did not restrain their desire for preeminent honor; indeed he wishes us to aspire to the

most exalted rank. He does not however wish us to seize the first place, but rather to win the highest honor by humility. He stood a child among them because he wants us to become childlike. A child has no desire for honor; it is not jealous, and it does not remember injuries. And he said: “If you become like that, you will receive a great reward, and if, moreover for my sake, you honor others who are like that, you will receive the kingdom of heaven; for you will be receiving me, and in receiving me you receive the one who sent me.” You see then what great things humility, together with simplicity and guilelessness, can accomplish. It causes both the Son and the Father to dwell in us, and with them of course comes the Holy Spirit also.²

So that's from Theophylact's *Commentary on St. Mark's Gospel*. So what struck me about this passage was that final reference to the Trinity. In other words, Theophylact is saying that when Jesus says whoever receives a child who is humble receives me, who is the embodiment of humility and not just me but also receives the one who sent me the father. To me that's a powerful, powerful insight into the fact that in humility, that when we live in humility, we in a sense invite the Trinity to dwell within us, because the Son, who came as man in the ultimate act of humility, right, as Paul tells us, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped at but he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, right, and going to death, even death on a cross. So the humility of Christ that he links with the child is also something he's calling us to do. He's calling us to live lives of humility, and not like the disciples to seek fame and fortune, to seek places of honor in this world, but to seek the honor of the kingdom of God, which is precisely attained through humility, through the virtue of humility. As he says, those who would be first of all must be the servant of all.

² Theophylact, *Commentary on Mark's Gospel*; trans. E. Barnecutt, p. 118-119