

The Twenty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 35:4-7a
<i>Response</i>	Praise the Lord, O my soul!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 146:6-7, 8-9, 9-10
<i>Second Reading</i>	James 2:1-5
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 7:31-37

The 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B continues the Church's journey through the wonderful Catholic Epistle of James, and here we read from James 2:1-5 on this interesting description of an early Christian liturgical assembly. So if you have ever wondered what was it like in the early Church when they gathered to worship, 1st Corinthians 10 and 11 is one of the most important passages, but here James 2 does give us a little window into some of the problems they had in the liturgical assembly in the 1st century. So here, listen to what James says:

My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "Have a seat here, please," while you say to the poor man, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brethren. Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him?¹

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.

This is an interesting passage because it follows right on the heels of James' exhortation in chapter 1 to be doers of the word, not hearers only, and to visit orphans and widows in their distress, that that kind of charity toward one's neighbor is pure and undefiled religion before God. So here he takes that emphasis on acts of charity toward the neighbor, and he actually brings it into the liturgical assembly with a specific instance. Apparently there are some people who are showing partiality to the rich in the gathering in the churches to which James is writing, although James doesn't use the word church. It's very interesting here that the word that the RSV translates as assembly is actually *synagoguē*. And we have a pretty good English word for *synagoguē* in Greek. It's synagogue.

So this actually buttresses the suggestion that I have made elsewhere. That while the letters of Paul are written to predominantly Gentile Christian congregations and believers in Jesus, a case can be made, and it goes back all the way to the early Church Fathers, that the Catholic Epistles are actually written to predominantly Jewish Christian congregations, Jewish believers in Christ. And James is a pretty strong example of that because he actually describes here the gathering of believers in Jesus as coming together to the *synagoguē*, to the synagogue. And it only stands to reason that as the gospel spread throughout the land of Israel, as well as into Jewish communities in the diaspora outside the land, that some of those believers, when they had become believers in Christ as Messiah, might gather in the assemblies, in the halls, where they had gathered before to celebrate the Old Covenant, to worship the God of Israel, to hear from the Psalms, to hear the Scriptures explained, that they would gather in the synagogues now to celebrate the New Covenant and to hear the Scriptures and to hear the Gospel proclaimed. We know for a fact that Paul would frequently go into the synagogues in the book of Acts and preach the Gospel in that synagogal setting.

So what appears to be being described here is a Christian assembly, but it is meeting in a synagogue. And unfortunately, in the context of this assembly, wherever it's located, partiality is being shown to the rich over the poor. So when the rich man comes in, you say, "hey, sit here," you know, "have the seat if you have fine clothing or gold rings on." Or if it is a poor person who comes in, you're saying "stand over there or sit at my feet" so that there's a division being

introduced into the liturgical assembly. And James is not happy about it because he says, if you do this, you've:

made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts.

This is a very interesting parallel to what we saw if you look in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul too will talk about how when they gather together for the Lord's Supper, in 1 Corinthians 11, it says:

When you meet together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

So apparently what Paul's describing here is a situation where the assembly is gathering together. It's for the Lord's Supper, but apparently in the early Church there were meals that would accompany these liturgical assemblies in some way, shape or form. And the rich believes in Christ who have food are eating and drinking, and some of them even to excess, while those who are poor have nothing, sit there with nothing to eat. And Paul rebukes them, precisely for making a distinction. They should be sharing their food and drink among each other and not make a distinction between those who are wealthy and those who are poor. So a similar distinction takes place in the Church to which James is writing in James 2. Although it has less to do with the eating of food and drink and more to do with the positions that are taken by people in the context of the surgical assembly.

Now, thankfully none of this ever happens today. There's no distinctions being made in the parish. There aren't special seats that are given to certain wealthy or influential members of the parish., but in ancient times it was something of a problem. And so James here reminds them that God has chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the Kingdom to which he promised to those who love him. So Christ, of course, himself, is the kind of preeminent example of someone who, as Paul says elsewhere, "although he was rich, he was made poor for our sake so that we too might become rich." And here he's talking

about spiritual wealth, spiritual poverty, and then the spiritual riches of salvation and of life in Christ. But he lives his earthly life as a poor man, and so to despise the poor in the context of the liturgical assembly that is meeting together in the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, as James says in 2:1, who he calls the Lord of glory, is a kind of countersign. It's at odds with the very mystery of the life of Jesus himself, who lived his life as a poor man and came to make us rich with the spiritual wealth of the heavenly Kingdom.

So in James 2, although this isn't the in the lectionary for today, he goes on to make clear that he's talking about conflict between the poor and the rich when he says:

But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you, is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme that honorable name by which you are called?

So apparently James appears to describe the fact that some wealthy members of the community are actually the ones persecuting the believers in Jesus and dragging them into court. So how ironic is it that wealthy believers would treat the poor badly in the context of the liturgy whenever it's the wealthy who are persecuting this synagogue, this Christian synagogue, this Christian assembly of believers. So, anyway, a little window into the conflict in the early Church.

Okay, so with that said, I just want to make two quick points, one historical and one more theological, from the living tradition that I think is worth highlighting. The first one is just the little bit of a window that this gives us into the shape of the liturgy in the 1st century AD. One of the things you'll notice here... Well, let me just put this in context. In recent years, I've noticed it's become popular, at least on the Internet, for some people, to say that seats in the liturgy, like the idea of being seated in churches, was invented at the time of the Protestant Reformation. I recently read an article about this, about how pews were only invented after the time of the Protestant Reformation. And I remember chuckling a bit because it was pretty clear to me that the person hadn't taken time to look at the New Testament with regard to seats in the liturgical assembly, because both the Gospels and the letter of James make clear that while it may be the case that certain Christian churches throughout the first Millennium, for example, didn't have seats, and that

is something that can be documented; it's not the case that seating in liturgy was invented by Protestants because it's already mentioned in the New Testament. So, for example, in the Gospel Mark 12, we should remember this, when Jesus warns the disciples against the Scribes and the Pharisees, he says, and I quote:

Beware of the scribes, who like to go about in long robes, and to have salutations in the market places and *the best seats in the synagogues...* (Mark 12:38-39)

So clearly, what's being described here is seating arrangements in the synagogue in which some seats are better than others and the most prominent seats go to the Scribes and the Pharisees as a kind of mark of honor. So that's one point. And then secondly, if you want to look into this in a little more detail, there's a little book here, just a tiny book, by Lee Levine, called *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*. And in this book, which deals not just with texts about synagogue but also with archaeology, Levine writes, and I'm quoting him here:

[B]enches and columns... are among the most ubiquitous archaeological findings... Many, if not most synagogues apparently also had wooden benches or mats in addition to the fixed stone benches.²

So the idea of having fixed seating in worship is not a Protestant invention, it is actually Jewish. So even if it fell away overtime in Christian assemblies, it goes back to the ancient Jewish synagogue. And the best evidence for this actually is James 2, because we have an early Christian gathering, they're assembling in a liturgical context, and James says the way that they're making a distinction between the rich and the poor is that they say to the rich man who comes in:

“Have a seat here, please,” while you say to the poor man, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,”

Whereas to the poor they say:

² Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (2nd ed.; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), 337.

“Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet”

on the ground. And so the offering of a seat to the rich person, which is either going to be a bench or a stone seat, is a kind of a sign of their status. But it's also evidence that there were benches, or what we would call pews, right, of some sort in early Christian assemblies, at least in the 1st century, and at least in Christian communities like James', which are flowing out of a Jewish context and reflect Jewish practices of worship.

So, I must bring that up for you as an interesting kind of window into Christian history, and also too for what it's worth, it wasn't just Jewish Christian assemblies that had seats in it. St. Augustine of Hippo in his famous book on instructing beginners in faith, sometimes called *On Catechizing the Uninstructed*, he actually records the fact that seats were available for the people in the churches in Italy as well. So it was an Italian custom that they didn't have in North Africa. Listen to Augustine's word:

Another way to meet our listener in his need is to offer him a seat... In certain overseas churches [=Rome] there is a far more prudent practice: not only are bishops seated to address the people, but seats are available for the people too. Thus it can be avoided that a frailer person, worn out by standing, would be distracted from his highly salutary purpose or even forced to leave.³

So again, I'm just bringing this up because on the one hand, it just gives us a little interesting window into what the liturgical assembly looked like in the early Church, which we don't have much evidence for. But second, I'd also like to just kind of put the rest of this myth, that seating in liturgical context is something that does not exist until the Protestant Reformation. That's that's just not true. It's there in 1st century churches, as witnessed by the letter of James, and apparently it's there in late 4th, early 5th century churches in Italy, as witnessed by St. Augustine,

³ Augustine, *On Catechizing the Uninstructed* 13,19; trans. Raymond Canning

who, by the way, thinks it's a good idea to have seats rather than stand up because the listener might become fatigued and be distracted from hearing the word of God. So Augustine's idea about seating in the assemblies is primarily oriented toward the listener being able to receive the word. Which seated is a kind of natural posture of receptivity to the Word of God.

In closing, though, I would like to just end with another quote from Augustine in his *Confessions*, on the question of the poor in the assembly. Here he's reflecting on the kind of abuse we see toward the poor in the Letter of James, and this is what Augustine writes:

Far from me is the notion that in your tabernacle, Lord, the rich should be more highly regarded than the poor, or the noble than the less well-born. You have chosen the weak things of this world to put the strong to shame, and you have chosen things which are dishonorable, despised and of no account, in order to bring to nothing the things which are.⁴

I would just encourage you to reflect on that. In the liturgical assembly, especially in the liturgical assembly and in the Tabernacle, in the sanctuary as Augustine puts it, there should be no divisions and no discrimination against the poor and in favor of the rich, because Christ himself came to this world as one who was poor in order to put the strong to shame. So that in the liturgical assembly itself, above all, all of those worldly distinctions and divisions should fall away as we become one body, worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ, as James calls him, “the Lord of glory.”

Well let me just say one more thing about this. Notice too that he's not just poor, but he's wearing shabby clothing. You could also translate the Greek word here as filthy clothing. So this is an important element as well. On the one hand, it is true, like in Psalm 96, God says to Israel “worship the Lord in holy attire”, right? So the idea of sacred garments, like the vestments of the priests, for example, garments that are set apart for worship, is something that's part of Scriptural tradition. At the same time, apparently already in the early Church there was a difficulty or problem with some people disdaining those who might come into the assembly dressed in

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions* 8.4.9; trans. in Gerald Bray, p. 22

filthy clothes or dirty clothes or shabby clothes, because they're poor, right? So James is exhorting his readers not to treat the poor that way, and not to treat those who come into the assembly in shabby clothing as if they are not worthy of attention, or as if they are in some way in a lesser category than those who are rich, and those who dress well, who have fine clothing, who have gold rings on their fingers. To make that distinction among yourselves, he says, is to become judges with evil thoughts.

So the temptation to judge others in the liturgical assembly by what they wear and their outward appearance is a danger that needs to be avoided and has been a danger that has needed to be avoided since the very beginning of the Church. And it's a salutary warning for us as well as we think about our own activity and the way we think and the way we look and the way we judge in the liturgical assembly today.