

FROM THE PASTOR'S



23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 10, 2006 B

NO PLACE FOR SNOBBERY AND CLASS DISTINCTION IN THE CHRISTIAN ASSEMBLY.

Today we listened to the second of five readings from the letter of James. His focus in chapter 2:1-5 is class distinction, favoritism and partiality. James lived in a society in which:

- There were masters and slaves
- Where women were subordinate to men.
- Where Jews felt superior to Gentiles.

These were accepted cultural mores. Just imagine how social relationships were impacted when both masters and slaves, men and women, Greeks and Jews were baptized into Christ Jesus. Should masters, men and Jews continue to treat their counterparts as inferior. Or was a change of heart needed? It seems Paul was very clear on his answer to that question.

*All are baptized in Christ,
you have all clothed yourselves in Christ,
and there are no distinctions
between Jew and Greek
slave and free, male and female.
All are one in Christ Jesus. Gal. 3:27-29*

It would be hard for us to imagine just how radical and revolutionary the above verses were in a society in which class distinctions were deeply ingrained and practiced. The above statement must have seemed like a tornado rushing through the Christian assembly. We can only imagine what it was like when masters were seated in the assembly beside slaves or perhaps when a slave took on a leadership role in the church - if this happened. Unfortunately, Paul's teaching on the equality of all people in Christ was ignored until quite recently. Women continued to be treated as second class citizens — still are in some cultures and to some extent in all cultures. Also, the evil institution of slavery existed until quite recently. When one thinks about it, isn't it amazing how the church failed in both of these areas to champion the cause of women and slaves. Unfortunately, the church became a part of the problem. Nevertheless, the above mentioned verses from Galatians have been a great source of encouragement for all advocates of social justice.

It seems James was also dealing with social snobbery in his community. He noticed that some members were

treated differently than others. James sought to put into practice Paul's words: "Come on guys, in Christ we are all equal." Perhaps James was speaking to his ushers when he said: "Show no partiality" when it comes to seating people. James would say to us: "In the Christian assembly no one is better than anyone else. Christ died for *all* and he loves *all* equally. So don't treat some people as better than others."

God's Partiality Towards the Poor and the Churches Preferential Option for the Poor.

In the last verses of today's reading from James we hear these words:

*Listen my beloved brothers and sisters.
Did not God choose those who are poor
In the world to be rich in faith
And heirs of the kingdom. . . .*

The poor are the special object of God's love not because they are poor. After all poverty is an evil. The poor are special to God because all too often they are victims of unjust social structures and oppression of one kind or another. Sure there are lazy poor. But the vast majority of the poor want to improve their circumstances. When God looks down upon our world or global village, he literally sees billions of people who are poor due to no fault of their own. I believe some 40 million live at or below poverty level in the U.S. God must say to himself: 'there is something very wrong with this picture. It was not my intention to have the majority of my sons and daughters live in dire poverty.'

God, in a very concrete way, showed his special love for the poor when he decided to become one of us. He could have chosen to be born of a Princess in a palace. Surely this would be only fitting for the King of the Universe. Amazingly he choose to be born of a woman of poor means, in an abandoned stable. And he choose to have as his first visitors not the important people in town, but poor shepherds—outcasts in the society of the time. If that was not a clear statement about how God felt about the poor, I don't know what is. In his public ministry Jesus was constantly reaching out to the poor and the abandoned.

The Church and Parishes Must Follow the Example of Our Master.

As the Bride of Christ, the church must also follow the example of his care for the poor and marginalized.

Otherwise, she would be failing in her mission big time and come under God's severe judgment. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that following Christ, "those who are oppressed by poverty are the object of a *preferential love* on behalf of the church . . . (# 2448).

Ascension Outreach to the Poor

I think we at Ascension can feel pretty good about the many ways that we share time, treasure and talent to help those who are the special object of God's love. I continue to be most grateful to all of you who give time and talent to the *Thrift Store, Social Concerns, Daily Bread, Habitat for Humanity and Gift of Water*. Each of these ministries are wonderful concrete ways that wonderful representatives of our parish reach out to the less fortunate. I know lots more of you support these ministries with donations. Thank you a thousand times over. I am also glad that through use of our parish tithes (10,000 this past fiscal year) we were able to support the efforts of those working to improve the lot of the poor in Third World countries.

If you are retired and enjoy good health or if you still work and have spare time, consider giving some time to one of the above ministries. More and more I become deeply convinced that life is *not* just about us and our families. Each of us are citizens and members of a larger family where there are a lot of hurting people. Our legacy at the end of our time here on earth will be all about what we did or failed to do to give a leg up to the 'least of our brothers and sisters'. (Matt 25:35-46)

I am most grateful to Mary Kay Kantz for her willingness to teach and facilitate our upcoming *JustFaith* series beginning this Monday. This series will help participants to connect their faith with working for social justice.

Lessons on Discipleship from Mark

Some commentators on the gospel of Mark and on the Lectionary suggest that one way to look at the upcoming gospel passages in Mark is to view them as Lessons in Christian Discipleship. As Jesus travels, he teaches prospective disciples what will be demanded of them if they choose to follow him. The following is one way to name Mark's lessons on true Discipleship:

Lesson #1: Be Inclusive - All belong in my kingdom today's gospel.

Lesson #2: Be ready to carry your cross—next Sunday or 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Lesson #3: Servant Leadership - 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Lesson #4: Faithful discipleship means openness to the surprising work of the Spirit, solidarity with the poor, avoiding occasions of sin. 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Lesson #5. The Permanency of Marriage—Faithful disciples love each other in good times and bad. 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Lesson #6: Making God first in our lives. The danger of material riches. 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Today's lesson on *inclusiveness* ties in very well with our second reading, which is also about inclusiveness. Sometimes when it comes to confession some of us wonder what it is we need to confess. As we go through the coming weeks, we might ask ourselves, how well we are living Mark's lessons on discipleship. We can be sure very few of us live today's lesson. After all how many of us invite the poor and homeless to dinner? Yet, Jesus asks that we do this. Luke 14:12-14. How many of us tend to judge and react to people according to their dress? Mark Twain once quipped: "*Clothes make a man; naked people have little if any influence on society.*" Also, this week we might ask to what extent we carry within us the sins of snobbery and prejudice. They are so ingrained in us that the vast majority of us do not even notice. I am *constantly challenged* to treat the disheveled and poorly dressed person with the same dignity as well dressed. Yet, I never confess that in confession. Too bad, I need to and I hope I will the next time. Having to write columns like this one really challenges my conscience.

A Visit from Fr. David Wreh

Msrgr. David Wreh is an S.M.A. priest (Society of African Missions) from Liberia, Africa. I came to know him when he came to my last parish to speak on behalf of his Diocese as a part of the Propagation of the Faith program. Fr. David has stayed in touch with me ever since. Every two years he spends several months in America raising funds for his diocese. In a recent letter to me, he told me that on *three* different occasions his diocese in Liberia was forced into exile to the Ivory Coast, a neighboring country because his church condemned a war that killed thousands of innocent civilians, caused destruction to properties and displayed a gross violation of human rights. During the course of this terrible war, the infrastructures of the church (schools, rectories, convents and clinics) were either burnt down, vandalized or destroyed. Can you imagine trying to recover from such destruction.

I offered to help Fr. David in whatever way we could. I asked him to send me information about his needs. He did. A gift of \$16,000 will rebuild his parish hall. I have decided to give him that gift from this year's parish tithe money. Since that is a sizable gift, I thought it would be nice if you could meet Fr. David. In this way he will put a face on the needs of the church in Liberia. In my own mind, I have been going back and forth on whether to have a second collection in addition to the \$16,000 gift. I am aware that we had two missionaries here in July and Fr. Fred Ruse, newly assigned to our Sister Diocese in the Dominican Republic will be here in mid October. I have decided to go ahead with the collection, because the need in Liberia is great and because you always seem anxious to help out those in need.

Sue Holaday Memorial Fund

Many know of the devoted work of Sue Holaday in feeding and caring for the poor of this area. Ms. Holaday, who was executive director of Daily Bread the past six years, died of cancer on August 9 at age 59. Recently a very moving memorial service, attended by several hundred friends including Daily Bread clients and volunteers, was held at Ascension. Daily Bread has established the **Sue Holaday Memorial Endowment** to honor her and to provide ongoing services for feeding the poor and homeless in our community. Parishioners, Howard and Mercedes Buescher have offered a \$50,000 challenge to encourage gifts to this fund. Every dollar you contribute will be matched by the family until a grand total of \$50,000 has been matched. To contribute, mail your tax-deductible contribution to Daily Bread and write "Sue Holaday Fund" on the memo line of your check. The address is Daily Bread, 815 E. Fee Avenue, Melbourne, FL 32901. This is a very worthwhile cause. I have decided to give a gift of \$5,000 from our parish tithe and \$1,000 from my own tithe fund. It boggles my mind that there are so many homeless and poor people in our great nation. While some of them may be lazy louts—which of course is not for us to judge—many are mentally ill. The fact is I *never* wonder if I am going to eat today, but other members of our Melbourne family do. I'd love for Ascension community to be a leader in building up a strong *Endowment Fund* for the poor and homeless in our area.

9/11

This Monday is the fifth anniversary of that horrific day in the history of our country. Even though we have 'moved on', we can be sure that thousands who lost loved ones are still dealing with the scars of that terrible day. Let's keep them in prayer. By the way, I thought the movie on 9/11, *World Trade Center*, was very well done.

Consider Sharing Those CD's

We have now sold about 400 CD's on Catholicism. As I listen and re-listen to some of them, I think that they have a great chance to draw people into the church or Catholics back into the church. I would especially love it if you would help share the following two tapes:

- ***Seven Reasons to be Catholic—Peter Kreeft.*** Peter is a very well educated man and is presently a professor at Boston College - a Jesuit school. His seven reasons to be a Catholic are very interesting and compelling.
- ***Witness of Michael Matthews.*** Michael was on the Journey Home program two weeks ago. At one stage in his life one of his prayers was "Thank God I am not Catholic." God does have a sense of humor when he starts to work on an anti-Catholic Baptist Minister and gradually brings him home to the church *Jesus* founded.

While we should *always* be most respectful of either Faith Traditions, we should not hesitate to share the wonderful gift of Catholicism with others. So many non-Catholics are misinformed about Catholic beliefs and practices. If only they could discover what people like Peter Kreeft and Michael Matthews discovered. I believe they would consider looking seriously into joining our church. But, this will not happen unless people like you help me to put inspiring stories in their hands. You can get these \$2 CD's in the parish office or outside church. For Spanish speaking parishioners, check last week's *Journey Home* guest, Carlos Caso Rosendl, website www.voxfidei.com or email him at voxfidei@yahoo.com. Carlos is a former Jehovah Witness.

I am also interested in making a CD of parishioners who have a story to tell about conversion to Jesus or to the church or on finances and faith, parenting, the healing of a marriage etc. Might God be calling you to tell a story that will touch lives? Pray on it. If the answers is yes, let me know.

Have a wonderful week,

