



Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time September 9, 2012 B

NO PLACE FOR PARTIALITY, 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;
- women were subordinate to men; and
- 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 to see masters seated side by side with slaves in the assembly, or perhaps slaves taking on leadership roles in the church—if this ever happened. Unfortunately, Paul’s teaching on the equality of all people in Christ had been 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. In the same manner, the evil institution of slavery carried on until quite recently. When one thinks about it, isn’t it amazing how the Church has failed 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: *“In Christ all are equal.”* Perhaps James was speaking to his ushers when he said: “Show no partiality” when it came 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 better than others.”

God’s partiality towards the poor and the Church’s preferential option for the poor

At the end 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. About 40 million people 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 chooses to be born of a woman of poor means in an abandoned stable. And he chooses 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 Jesus in 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).

Show no partiality

The following is an excerpt from a reflection by Fr. David Scotchie on today's second reading.

Majora Carter, a MacArthur "genius grant" recipient, put five questions to leading scientists:

- *Do you believe that some people should breathe dirtier air than others?*
- *Do you believe that some people should drink contaminated water?*
- *Do you believe environmental burdens are equally distributed throughout the U.S. population?*
- *Do you believe that if energy, transportation, agriculture and waste infrastructure was sited near affluent people as easily as it is sited near poor people, it would look like it does today? Do you believe environmental burdens affect poor people more than affluent ones?*

Carter, writing in the magazine Sojourners in August 2009, was surprised that many scientists asked what types of contamination were involved or what "dirtier air" meant. She had assumed that anyone would agree that environmental burdens should be borne equally without favoritism.

Carter is not the only one who assumes environmental equality. Linking the development of peoples with the environment, Pope Benedict XVI encouraged governments to counter harm to the environment. Further, those who benefit from natural resources should bear their economic and social costs rather than other peoples or future generation ("Caritas in Veritate," paragraph 50).

The fact that the pope wrote about unequal environmental burdens means that, as far as the pope is concerned, unequal environmental burdens exist. Yet the scientists equivocated. Rather than assume equality, their answers allowed for unequal sharing of environmental burdens.

The Letter of James condemns attention to those who can do for you over those who can do nothing for you.

He warns against admiration of the wealthy who can open doors for you.

Lessons on discipleship from Mark's Gospel

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 are some of the ways to live 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:** 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 on the same subject. 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 the well-dressed.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Sarah

