

SEPTEMBER 20TH, 2015: TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 2:12, 17-20 James 3:16-4:3 Mark 9:30-37

Today's gospel pericope gives us the second of Mark's three ways of dying and rising with Jesus.

Last week, Mark's Jesus told his followers they must carry their "taus:" be totally open to whatever God asks of them. Today he becomes more specific about the implications of such openness.

Following the same pattern of predication, misunderstanding and clarification, the evangelist begins by having Jesus talk about his future arrest, death and resurrection. But then quickly adds, "They did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to question him." It's clear they didn't understand because "on the way" they were "discussing among themselves who was the greatest."

To the amazement of the Twelve, Jesus first confronts their ambitions - "Those who wish to be first, shall be the last of all and the servants of all" - then presents them with an "audio/visual." "Taking a child, he placed it in their midst, and putting his arms around it, he said to them, 'Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me.'"

No matter what part of Mark's gospel we're reading, we must always go back to chapter one. There - at the beginning of his public ministry - Jesus not only announces the good news that "God's kingdom is at hand," he also tells us how to surface God working effectively in our everyday lives. We must "repent:" totally change our value systems. We'll only begin noticing God present in those we meet and the situations we experience after we achieve a 180 degree switch in what we believe is important in life: when we start focusing on people and things we never before noticed. In this particular passage, when we take our eyes off ourselves and put them on others.

If our life's goal is always to become the head high honcho, people who crisscross our lives will simply be stepping stones to reaching that end. If some individuals, like children, really can't help us achieve the notoriety for which we yearn, just sluff them off to the side. Anyone useless to me, is useless, period.

As an essential part of repentance, Mark's convinced that those committed to dying and rising with Jesus will eventually discover no one is useless. Each person we encounter throughout our lives will present us with another way to surface the risen Jesus among us.

This insight parallels the insight some Jews received about 100 years before Jesus' birth. During that period the Wisdom author, for instance, began to understand there's a life after this life. Once that shift in their faith happened, God's biblical people started zeroing in on more than just the here and now. There was a future to consider; a time when even some of "those condemned to a shameful death" would be taken care of by Yahweh. Life doesn't end with our physical deaths.

In the same vein, the writer of the letter of James is convinced that changing our life's focus will eventually change our personalities. We always have the possibility of switching from jealous and ambitious individuals to peaceful, gentle and compliant members of a vibrant Christian community.

But of course, as Mark reminds his readers in today's pericope, to pull this off, we first have to be committed to dying and rising as his Jesus defines those two terms. Among other things, we have to be willing to look into a mirror and notice the person standing next to us before we notice ourselves, to experience God's presence in an individual afflicted with Alzheimer's, and to never again construct a church building with a children's cry room in it.

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SEPTEMBER 27TH, 2015: TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Numbers 11:25-29 James 5:1-6 Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

One of the most difficult things for God's followers to learn is that their task on earth is simply to proclaim God's message, not to control God's message.

The difficulty arises because, in most situations, we proclaim God's message against the background of an institution. Institutions normally have membership lists, informing us who's in and who's out. Some individuals are in the institution's good graces; others aren't. Not only do we have to be familiar with the membership regulations, those who play footloose with such stipulations, might lose their own membership.

That's one of the reasons many of us are taken aback when Scripture scholars, like the late Raymond Brown, correctly insisted, "The historical Jesus had no intention of founding a church as we know it." The Palestinian Jew who lived in the first third of the first century CE, whom most Christians regard as the founder of their "religion," never formed an institution. It wasn't, as some of us presumed, that he just didn't have time to get around to it; he never planned to do it in the first place.

As we know from his initial proclamation of the good news back in chapter one, Jesus of Nazareth revolved his ministry around announcing that God's kingdom is right here and now. He was convinced that God is present, working effectively in everyone's daily life - no exceptions - in the lives of those who are in and those who are out.

He clearly states that conviction in today's gospel pericope. John begins the narrative by informing him, "Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us." Expecting a nod of approval, John must have been totally surprised by Jesus' response: "Do not prevent him!" The reason is simple: "Whoever is not against us is for us." In other words, "Why are you trying to stop someone from doing good just because he or she isn't following the rules you've artificially created for doing good? God's obviously able to work through a person who 'does not follow us,' just as well as through people who do follow us."

More than 1,200 years before Jesus' birth, Moses dealt with a similar situation: how can Eldad and Medad have received Yahweh's spirit when they weren't in the group designated to receive that spirit? Doesn't Yahweh have to obey the institution's rules and regulations? Once again a major biblical figure challenges an informer's frame of mind. "Would that Yahweh might bestow his spirit on them all," Moses responds.

For our sacred authors a frame of mind consistently trumps membership in an institution. That's why Jesus' proclamation of the good news always includes a demand for "repentance." Unless we turn our value systems upside down - experience a "metanoia" - we'll never benefit from the good news. Along with getting rid of any obstacles which stop us from achieving the life Jesus offers, we're to begin experiencing people and situations from Jesus' viewpoint, as James does in today's second reading. No longer, for instance, is wealth something to be desired or achieved.

One more point: we've traditionally misunderstood the identity of the "little ones who believe in me." According to Marcan experts, Mark's Jesus isn't referring to actual children here; he's talking about Christian believers, those who've already given themselves over to the risen Jesus. He reserves one of his worst sins (and punishments) for those who subvert the original fervor and dedication of his followers; who change or obliterate the frame of mind he initially instilled in them.

Could some of us "institutional" Catholics be guilty of such a sin?

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