

PENTECOST XVII

19 September 2021

A Homily preached by the **Reverend Roger B. White**
at St Mark's Church, Bridgewater, Connecticut

Wisdom of Solomon 1.16 - 2.1, 12-22; Psalm 1; James 3.13 - 4.3, 87-8a; Mark 9.30-37

From the Collect of the Day that we have just prayed: *Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now as we are placed in the midst of things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure'.*

We have the invitation to include this collect in our prayers throughout this week; and, if you do and if you are a bit like me, you may begin to think back on the Gospel that we have just heard and find yourself becoming more and more ... impatient ... with Jesus' twelve principal disciples.

How obtuse can they be, and how can they be so very obtuse ...? They are Jews who presumably know the Psalms pretty well, and the Psalmist is pretty clear: the worldly wicked, wholly invested in the things of this world which are inevitably wearing out, 'are like chaff which the wind blows away', who shall fade from the earth and from memory, too. And the Psalm appointed for this morning assures us that the only defense that the godly have against the worldly is to appeal to the LORD, to adhere to God's Law and to seek both God's wisdom and God's help.

And the Hebrew 'Wisdom Tradition', which comes to include that reading from the Wisdom of Solomon, was also undoubtedly familiar to The Twelve, and it cannot be more clear: those preoccupied with the things of this world such as wealth, power, and celebrity are distracted by things that must disintegrate. They cannot know 'the wages of holiness, the prize for blameless souls' who are less entranced by riches and fame.

The earliest Christian writers, some of them contemporaries of The Twelve, do come to figure it out, and the Letter of James recalls the Wisdom Tradition in assuring us that 'envy and selfish ambition' are a false wisdom 'that do not come down from above, but [are] earthly, ... devilish'. For where envy and ambition are found 'there will also be disorder and wickedness. But the wisdom from above is ... pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits ... and a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace'.

But this morning The Twelve are not there yet, and indeed by the end of Mark's Gospel they are still puzzled, still scared. Today for the second time Jesus tells them that he will suffer betrayal and death at human hands. The first time he informs them, Peter takes him aside and berates him for scaring 'the other guys'. At once Jesus sharply rebukes Peter, calls him satanic, and tells him that his mind is on things that are passing away and not things of God. Peter, accuses Jesus, is looking out only for himself, for power as the world sees it.

And so today, when Jesus again tells them what is in store for the Son of Man,

everyone is afraid to say anything. They instead begin to whisper fiercely among themselves as if he will not notice. When he challenges them, they mumble something about debating who among them is the greatest --that is to say, If Jesus is so sure that his days are numbered, they need to sort out which of them will get to give the orders to their ragtag band. All of their minds are on transient earthly things --on 'envy and selfish ambition', on who gets to tell the others what to do.

And Jesus wants them to remember what he and the Wisdom Tradition try to teach: as the Letter of James puts it, 'Those conflicts and disputes among you, do they not come from your cravings ...? You covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts ...'.

Therefore Jesus dramatically sits down in the midst of them and takes into his arms a vulnerable child --the exemplar of someone without influence or power, someone incapable of doing anything to benefit their ambitions or pocket books-- and says that these are the ones you should be worrying about and not yourselves. Care for those who need care, and bless those who need blessings. In short, love those around you as God loves them: love your neighbors as yourself. Care only about loving. And, as the Letter of James advises, 'Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you'.

You see, despite the stubborn reluctance of The Twelve to grasp Jesus' teachings, it is not all that difficult to sort out what he asks of his followers. We already know it and can follow it. He asks us to make no distinctions in how we treat each other. To make no distinction between Gentiles and Jews; between rich and poor or amongst skin pigmentations. Make no distinctions between how we treat between farmers and financiers, lawyers and brick layers; amongst Independents, Republicans, Greens, Democrats, and Socialists; between high school dropouts and university professors. But our egos and our prejudices, our prides, our ambitions and our self-absorptions, our wants beyond our needs --and each of us has them: they are a dimensions of Human Nature-- all get in our way. Inwardly we hear, But what about me ...?! I want ...!

And so it may be good from time to time to remind ourselves that we spent last weekend remembering, mourning, and giving thanks for a lot of first responders who, instead looking away and standing aside, persuaded themselves to trudge upstairs towards their deaths in two burning skyscrapers in order to help more people run downstairs, outside, and back into life.

Their actions recall another dimension of Human Nature, of who each of us can also be. Their actions recall the words of Rabbi Hillel, whom Jesus himself surely studied: 'That which is hateful to you do not do to another. This is the whole of Torah [the whole of God's Law]. The rest [like this little homily] is commentary'. Amen.