

Years ago, when our grandchildren were young, we were visiting one of our daughters and her family. Our son-in-law opened a package he had received that was wrapped in bubble wrap. He gave it to our two oldest grandchildren with the statement, “Let’s see who can pop the most bubbles.” Almost immediately the two began to fight over the bubbles and began crying. After we got things sort of calmed down, my son-in-law turned to me and said, “It seems like almost every time I try to play with the children, they get into a fight and spoil whatever we are doing.” I said, “You had them competing against each other, and when you do that, there is always going to be a winner and a loser.” He responded, “But that’s fun.” I said, “For you, maybe, but not for the loser.”

The picture of human life that we see in today’s readings is not pretty. When Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to be killed, they don’t get it. Were they even listening? The gospel tells us that, along the way, “[they] had been discussing among themselves ... who was the greatest.” The second reading, The Letter of St. James, warns against “jealousy and selfish ambition,” against coveting and against asking God for something that is merely for our own pleasure. Warnings like these are not written, let alone included in our most important teachings, unless there are those who live in that way. And the result of living in that way, according to the Letter of St. James, is “disorder and every foul practice,” fighting and waging wars.

The portrait in our first reading is even uglier in its specificity: “Let us beset the just one With revilement and torture let us put [him] to the test Let us condemn him to a shameful death” Our passage from the Book of Wisdom is only an excerpt. Here is more:

Come, therefore, let us enjoy the good things that are real,
and use the freshness of creation avidly.
Let us have our fill of costly wine and perfumes,
and let no springtime blossom pass us by;
let us crown ourselves with rosebuds ere they wither.
Let no meadow be free from our wantonness;
everywhere let us leave tokens of our rejoicing,
for this our portion is, and this our lot.
Let us oppress the needy just man;
let us neither spare the widow
nor revere the old man for his hair grown white with time.

But let our strength be our norm of justice;
for weakness proves itself useless (Wisdom 2:6-11).

Is this a case of the more things change, the more they remain the same? Don't these statements sound like much of what we hear today? Wanting to be the greatest, competing against one another in jealousy and selfish ambition, plots against those with whom we disagree—this is not the stuff of children's games. This is what so many in our world devote their lives to. And it is easy, too easy, to point our fingers at big bankers and Wall Street. From children's games to the political scene to financiers and back to us, it seems that far too many of us focus on getting ahead and staying that way, no matter who suffers as a result.

We have, however, also in our readings for today a response to this way of life. In the Letter of St. James we read:

But the wisdom from above is first of all pure,
then peaceable, gentle, compliant,
full of mercy and good fruits,
without inconstancy or insincerity.
And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace
for those who cultivate peace.

Notice that this wisdom is from above; it is not human wisdom. I am reminded of what Jesus said to Peter when Peter began to "rebuke him" after Jesus told for the first time of the suffering and death he would have to endure: "Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."

And notice what Jesus says this time:

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."

Children had no standing during these times. Some of you even remember a time when children were to be seen and not heard. The Greek word that Jesus uses here means "receive, accept, take." Whoever then "receives and accepts" one of the respected among human beings is receiving and accepting God into his presence. One final point. The

gospel says, "If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all." The word *shall* following the third person *he* does not merely refer to the future; it indicates a threat, command or promise. Thus, if any one of us wishes to be first, we absolutely will be the last of all. May God pierce our consciences and help us to see ourselves as we really are.