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

Reflection for the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

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 to 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 tithe (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.