

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME — B

READING I Wis 2:12, 17-20

READING II Jas 3:16-4:3

GOSPEL Mk 9:9a, 30-37

In first-century B.C., Hellenistic (Greek speaking) Egypt, the author of the book of Wisdom suggested that immortality was the reward for wisdom. Drawing heavily on the book of Isaiah (Ch. 52-66), the author contrasts the pious (wise) Jew with the renegade (foolish) Jew. In language which reminds one of the fourth Suffering Servant Song (Is 52:13-53:12), he sharply delineates the attack of the wicked on the pious, just man. The lifestyle of the just man is necessarily a condemnation of the wicked. To prove that the just man's words are genuine, the wicked resolve to condemn him to a shameful death. According to the just man's own statement, God will provide for him since he is a son of God. The endurance of pain and torture will certainly confirm his gentleness and patience. The beginning of Ch. 3 shows that the just man did not really die since he shares community with God. Ongoing life with God is the reward for his wise lifestyle. Immortality, therefore, is the reward for wisdom.

The author of James lists some qualities of wisdom, then indicates some of the causes of problems in his community. In contrast to human faults of jealousy and strife, the author describes a truly Christian wisdom. Basically, one that has concern for others. Such wisdom brings a harvest of peace. Next, the author examines the causes of conflict and dispute. These arise from passion. Hence, they are not concern for others, and do not bring peace. Murder results from desire, and quarrels spring from a failure to pray. Even if they pray, they do not pray properly. For the author of James, such conduct is at variance with Christian wisdom.

The Gospel is Mark's second passion prediction. He follows the pattern established in 8:31-38. First, there is the prediction (v. 31), which is followed by the disciples' lack of understanding (vv. 32-33). This leads to Jesus' instruction on the nature of discipleship (vv. 34-37). Mark clearly states the difficulties involved in following Jesus: A perennial problem for any of his followers.

Mark combined originally independent sayings of Jesus. The example of the little child is a fitting commentary on the question of discipleship. In the Greco-Roman world, the child was not the object of contemporary American endearment. Since the child was totally subject to the authority of the head of the household, being a child was precarious. Hence, the child symbolizes powerlessness, and total dependence on others. Jesus points

out that the stance of the disciples should be the same. They should welcome the powerless and the disenfranchised as they shall be first in the kingdom. Where being last of all is to be servant of all.

The wise finish first. Modern society encourages the following slogans: "Nice guys finish last", and "We're number one." Biblical wisdom, however, offers a different focus. Wisdom appears as the art of steering through life (see Prv 1:5). Wisdom steers a course in which others come first. Paradoxically, the wise finish first.

The author of Wisdom depicts a wise person finishing first. His gentleness and his patience, indeed his very lifestyle articulate a concern for others. In Wisdom 3, the tables are turned: The pious wise man is exonerated by God. The wicked are forced to admit that the wise finish first.

The author of James depicts various lifestyles. Wisdom is rich in sympathy and concern for others. Foolishness is rich in self-seeking and fighting. The first brings peace. The second: Quarrels and disputes. Here, too, the wise finish first.

Mark presents Jesus as a teacher of wisdom. In his art of steering through life, to be first means to be last, to be lord means to be servant. Mark then, has Jesus deepen this teaching by embracing a little child. Such a person cannot offer power, prestige, and privilege. Yet the little child symbolizes Jesus' art of steering through life. The wise recognize that little children are the first concern. In Mark, the wise finish first.

Parents who provide for their family in the full sense of the word are wise: They finish first. The compassionate who have time and energy for others are wise: They finish first. Bosses who see the plight of their people and act on their behalf are wise: They finish first. Teachers who help students apart from the classroom situation are wise: They finish first.

Eucharist recites the story of the innocent, just man who seemingly was defeated. It is the story of one whose concern for others is apparently forgotten. The nice guy finished last! Yet Eucharist reverses all such values. Eucharist sees Jesus' vindication and exoneration in the resurrection. Eucharist offers this wisdom model to the worshipping community. It challenges the community to reflect the first/last, lord/servant theology in its world. Eucharist proclaims that through such theology, the wise finish first.