

THE EMMAUS SERIES

25th Sunday Year B

Wisdom 2:12, 17-20

James 3:16-4:3

Mark 9:30-37

The wisdom that is a gift from God makes for peace

The Galilean ministry of Jesus has ended in rejection. In today's gospel reading Jesus begins to give his whole attention to preparing his disciples for the final rejection that awaits him in Jerusalem – a rejection God will transform into a victory over all evil in the Saviour's Paschal Mystery. The first reading, from the Book of Wisdom vividly anticipates what lies ahead for Jesus. In fact, it is describing the selfishness and foolishness good people have to contend with in every age. The existence of real and pervasive evil presents a challenge to Christian faith. The freedom and responsibility that are the hallmarks of our human dignity will often be abused and obstruct the purposes of God. How is God to make creation a final masterpiece, by turning all things to good in the end?

There is something truly prophetic in the reading from Wisdom, because it echoes the Songs in the Book of Isaiah concerning God's Servant: 'the punishment reconciling us fell on him, and we have been healed by his bruises' (Is 53:5). These Songs were quoted by Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth (Lk 4:18-19). No doubt they were of great importance to him as his mission unfolded. God's designs have been patiently prepared. Evil is a problem for all of us: we have to contend with disruptive forces – within ourselves, in our dealings with others, in the wide world in which we live. Like the disciples Jesus is instructing, we are still learning how to cope. Those whom Jesus wants to be the bearers of the Good News of God's ways are still lost in their self-centred ambitions. It is a situation that is so typical of our human experience. It leads Jesus to give the disciples a lesson that is at once radical and simple: 'Anyone who wants to be first must become last of all and servant of all'. Perhaps we have here another echo of the Servant Songs that have been mentioned – Jesus himself will be our example in the living out of this truth. Great teacher that he is, Jesus goes on to give the disciples an object lesson - receive those who have nothing to give you in return, like this child I am embracing, he tells them, and you will be true disciples of mine and dear to my Father.

James' letter, as we have said, reflects the ideals of a Jewish community of Christian faith. Their spirituality has its roots in the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament and its call to live in harmony with God's ways. Today's reading shows how well these first Christians have learned the lesson Jesus was teaching the apostles on their way to Jerusalem. We are all challenged to look into our own lives as James names those things that belong to a world shaped by selfishness: 'jealousy and ambition', 'disharmony', 'battles between yourselves', unrealistic desires 'so that you fight to get your way by force'. It is all too familiar. How much more authentic and attractive is the alternative, shaped by God's ways – 'the wisdom that comes from above' – bringing 'peace', 'compassion' and generosity, fairness and straightforwardness. And James' characteristic practicality helps us to relate to this ideal as something within our reach: we must 'pray properly', not seeking through our prayer 'to indulge our own desires', but finding the joy that comes from identifying with the ways of God, after the example of Jesus.

John Thornhill sm