

25th Sunday (B)

19th September 2021

'Let us explore this gentleness of His'

Wis 2: *Let us test him with cruelty and torture ...*

Ps 53: *proud men have risen against me ...*

James 3: *Where do these wars and battles in yourselves first start?*

Mk 9: 30–37: the Son of Man will be put to death.

The Book of Wisdom (first reading) was written in Greek. So what, you might say? Well, it's unusual that it's written in Greek, because the vast majority of the Old Testament is written in Hebrew, the sacred language of the Jews. But the most-recent OT books, written in the final century or two before Christ, were written by the Jews of the Diaspora, the Jews scattered around the Mediterranean, such as in Alexandria, and their preferred language was Greek — hence Wisdom, Maccabees, Sirach, Judith, Tobit and some others, inspired books of the pre-Christian era, are originally in Greek, and were never in Hebrew. We accept them as canonical, part of Sacred Scripture, and given to us in faith for our edification.

Take, for example, that wonderful first reading, from Wisdom, ch. 2 — really worth taking away on the sheet, reading and meditating on again, in full, later on. It's one of my favourite texts in the Old Testament, one of the most

powerful prophecies of all, in my opinion. It crops up one other time in the Church's year, namely, in the run-up to Holy Week in late Lent. Why? Because it's such a clear prediction of the twisted, vicious, sin-laden attitude of man to the infinitely holy, sinless, Son of God: "*Let us test Him with cruelty and with torture, and thus explore this gentleness of His and put His endurance to the proof. Let us condemn Him to a shameful death ...*" And why do they propose this violent course of action? Because "*the virtuous man ... annoys us and opposes our way of life*" and (in the verses missing from our text today) "*He stands, a reproof to our way of thinking, the very sight of Him weighs our spirits down; His way of life is not like other men's ... He holds aloof from our doings ..., He proclaims the final end of the virtuous as happy and boasts of having God as His Father.*" This has always struck me — and its inclusion in the lectionary readings before Passiontide accords with this — as the most poignant and pointed explanation of the horrific treatment of Jesus. When one reads those words, written in the late-1st c. BC, maybe 50–80 years before Our

Lord's suffering, one sees already that those late-OT Scriptures were clearly pointing to a suffering Messiah. One cannot but be moved at the clarity of prophecy: what the Book of Wisdom speaks of, is precisely what happened to Jesus. His utter goodness was hated, His innocence taken advantage of, His saving claim to be Son of God the Father was viciously rejected. The latter-day, Greek-speaking Jews of the century before Jesus clearly acknowledged this dynamic, that the one who is perfectly good, simply because He preaches and practises good, suffers the hatred of the sinner.

It's a perverse dynamic I'm sure we've seen many a time, even from the youngest age, for example, when the good, quiet, studious, well-spoken child is deliberately picked on in the playground. Original sin, quite obviously, at work. Multiply this scene up, many times, and you see how it can be that the very presence of Christ — His Word of Truth — can rile some of His hearers in just the way the Book of Wisdom predicts, and the Son of God quickly become the Suffering Servant. Think of how early on in the

Gospels (Mk 3, Lk 4, Jn 5) Jesus suffers the sort of extreme opposition that is physically threatening.

So, as we move to consider the Gospel today, ... what an irony of ironies. The Lord is teaching the apostles about the fact that He will be put to death — a fact in accordance with those Jewish Scriptures like the Book of Wisdom — and yet He is, well, quite simply, ignored! The seriousness of Jesus's predicament — imagine it! ... the crushing weight of all the hate, coming to a head in His imminent Passion, and yet the apostles effectively just don't connect: "*they did not understand what He said, and were afraid to ask Him.*" Instead, what do they do? They ignore His serious message, and bicker about which of them is the "greatest"! How often the Lord must almost have despaired of His apostles: armed with all the knowledge they had, of Jewish tradition, Sacred Scripture, and His own divine instruction, and yet ... they so often completely miss the point, and revert to worldly considerations far from the Gospel. What irony! Jesus has the most important message of all time to get across to them, the crucial words for

humanity about His saving sacrifice ... and all His followers want to talk about is, “Which of us is the best?”!

Jesus’s super-patient response to them is to make a plea for *smallness* (in the example of the child He sets before them), not greatness. He calls for *gentleness*, not arrogance; for *trust*, not control. We are constantly surrounded, aren’t we, by the promotion of so-called greatness: footballer of the year; personality of the decade, rich lists, man of the match ... prizes, celebrities, beauty, airtime, media coverage, influencers. Yet there is only *One* true great: Jesus, who did not court greatness, even though He was the eternal Son of the living God, but instead let Himself be put to death as a criminal.

On Thursday, it’s the feast of Padre Pio, canonized a few years back. He is known the world over, and yet he hardly ever left the Italian Franciscan friary where he lived for decades. He said, “I only want to be a poor friar who prays.” He consciously sought simplicity, humility, and smallness. He had no aspirations to greatness, and yet thousands now can attest to his greatness — to the help of

His intercession in their prayers.

We ourselves can honestly be more peaceful if we let God guide us in our smallness in whatever way He wishes. Do not aspire to be honoured and adulated, especially if in that way you will be taken away from your commitments to God. If promotion, success or honours, or other ‘great’ things come your way, then see in them the hand of God: not, “how well have I done!” but “how is God looking to use me here, now that he has put me here?” The only true greatness is, as Padre Pio showed, to do what God wants of you. If you do that in your life, then the real greatness, life with Jesus forever, is yours. You do not need to struggle to be great — God will hand you that greatness for free, if in your smallness you humbly place yourself there in His presence open-handed, waiting to receive it. Jesus undertook in full an acceptance of humiliation, being most cruelly despised — if He can do that, great God as He is, then we too can embrace a humility that allows His greatness, and His alone, to work in us. *If anyone wants to be first of all he must make himself last of all and servant of all.*