

25th Sunday (B)

22nd September 2024

‘True greatness is in meekness before God and in humble service’

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.

Supposing you’re walking up towards Newman House along Gower Street — you’re debating with a friend, a bit animated, verbally sparring. Jesus comes up alongside you and says, “What were you arguing about as you walked along the road?” And you remain silent, because you were arguing about which was the greatest: which is the best university to be at; which the best course to be on — the best teaching, the best lecturers; the course that has the most prestige; the degree that will get you the best prospects after university, the best ‘CV points,’ the best internship chances, the largest salary opportunity after you’ve graduated. But you remain silent, because in the face of Jesus’s question, you suddenly realise that these things, which can seem to loom large in one’s student life, and give one a sense of superiority, pale into insignificance compared to the greatness of the *Gospel*, the greatness of knowing and loving Jesus.

The Gospel passage today from Mk 9 follows on from last Sunday’s (Mk 8), when Jesus introduced to His Apostles the theme of His Passion and Death for the first

time — the fact that He, truly ‘the greatest,’ the Messiah, in fact, “*the son of the living God*,” was to be treated as if He were the least, the worst criminal, the greatest wrong-doer. St Peter bristled at this prediction of Jesus’s, and argued with the Lord, saying that this must never happen to Him — he couldn’t square it with the realisation that He had just voiced that this rabbi, this Master that He followed, was truly *divine* ... How could He, then, suffer ignominiously in the Holy City? ... How could he possibly be destined for severe ill-treatment, physical abuse, and the horror of crucifixion? Yet *this is* what Jesus had said, and He roundly criticized St Peter for contradicting it. He says it again today: our Gospel text contains the *2nd prediction of the Passion*.

Running through from last week to this, then, is the insistent theme that it is not worldly greatness, but humility, simplicity, and meek trustfulness in Christ, especially in the face of hardship, that is the key to Christian truth and godly living, and therefore happiness. Our Blessed Lord Himself did not seek out the greatness

that was truly His by virtue of His divinity; but He humbled Himself, taking the form of a servant, and not only took on this human flesh, but accepted all that came with it, including the suffering of rejection and violence. So, when He Himself models that for us, He is making it absolutely clear that humility is the path that He wants us on, in other words the path that He will *accompany* us on. He walks up to join you, asking you what you are discussing, correcting your priorities, and inviting you to walk with Him in the true greatness of humble service.

Both the 1st Reading today (Wis 2) and the 2nd Reading (James 3/4) support the text of the Gospel teaching. The 1st Reading is from the later parts of the OT (a Greek, not Hebrew text from maybe 150 BC) ... and this passage is one of the most poignant and precise passages predicting the Passion of Jesus — a prophecy so keen in its analysis of the “*cruelty and torture*” to be meted out on “*the virtuous man, since he annoys us and opposes our way of life.*” The very words of the text, “*Let us test him with cruelty and torture, and thus explore this gentleness*

of his and put his endurance to the proof. Let us condemn him to a shameful death ...” point unequivocally to the very sufferings of Jesus when He faces up to His Passion. It’s a moving passage, especially as it’s an *OT prophecy*. It sets out with dreadful starkness the perverse logic of hatred against the most-holy One, simply because He is good and holy, virtuous and upright. Indeed, even though St Peter at first objected to the prediction of the Passion, yet as Jesus later remarked, “*you see how it was written that the Christ would suffer.*” It is there, already, in the OT, that the Messiah would be mistreated, even to the vicious taking of His holy life. Jesus was at pains repeatedly to explain it to the Apostles to prepare them for this horror, but their minds were closed, or unwilling to contemplate the reality of it: “*they did not understand what He said, and were unwilling to ask.*” What a shame! How tragic that they chose not to ask, or take seriously the Lord’s warnings, or to seek clarification or a deeper understanding from the *very One* who had the greatest possible chance of explaining the reality of the mortal struggle with sin that

He was engaged in for their sake! Nevertheless, with infinite patience Jesus pursues His ministry amongst them, taking them at their slow and steady pace, and correcting them as necessary, so that eventually they *will* understand His ministry, Passion and sacrifice included.

The 2nd Reading, from St James, adds to this picture of Jesus's ethos of lowliness, humility and service. St James teaches with great strength of feeling against jealousy, ambition, and disharmony born of pride: "*You have an ambition that you cannot satisfy; so you fight to get your way by force.*" To which he contraposes "*the wisdom that comes down from above ... essentially something pure, ... makes for peace, and is kindly and considerate, ... full of compassion and shows itself by doing good.*" There is no other choice for a believing Christian, says this Apostle of the Lord, than that he/she live and act humbly, a peacemaker, and not by "*the desires fighting inside your own selves.*" It's a constant battle, isn't it, to be conscious of, and correcting, one's own false or selfish desires, and trying to live as Christ taught, which

is why we need each day to be attuned to His Word and His message, especially in the sacred Word of Scripture.

What, then, is the practical living out of today's message from Jesus — from Scripture — regarding holy humility and gentleness and simplicity? What might we actually try to do *differently*, as university students at this precious time of life, to take seriously as devout Christians the desire of Jesus for us that we live and love as He does?

— First, I think, we should remember the *privilege* that it is **to be at university**, and to live that privilege with a sense of gratitude and humility, not pride or self-importance. For all sorts of fortuitous reasons — apart from the fact that we worked very hard at school — we are able to be here at these universities to study for a few years. Let's not be puffed-up at being London-university students, but treat these years as a *great gift*, thanking the Lord for this opportunity!

— Secondly, we should not neglect our **parents**. We live away from home now, most of us, but we should endeavour to remain very much in touch with home. Our parents made sacrifices for us to be here, and may well support us financially. Quite apart from that, I'm sure that they miss

you! They miss having you at home, and have to get used to your being away and moving on with life. Don't belittle their ongoing concern for you: make a conscious effort to be in touch regularly, to help them feel that family closeness to you that they deserve. This is an act of kindness and humility, to show that *their* happiness is still as worthy of your concern as your own.

— Make **friends**, and be generous to one another with your time; in particular don't be too exclusive, or limit yourself just to the few: in our coffee time after Mass, e.g., seek out those who look new, or are not talking to anyone. Try to be open to others, too, beyond the confines of our Catholic community, to lead them gently to Christ by your prayer and way of life. Bring them to Newman House, if you can; lead them to this chapel, to share a bit in our prayer and our fellowship. This is the greatest act of friendship, to help them come to know Christ who is their Saviour as well as ours.

— There are so many who are **needy**, on our doorsteps and across the world — so many who need our care — and it is an act of profound solidarity to offer some of our time to volunteering to the benefit of others, allowing us so

importantly to go beyond the limits of our own studies or pleasure. Lots of volunteering opportunities are available to you at your universities, and also — as we will advertise in a couple of weeks — right here through Newman House. Each one of us should take seriously the chance to volunteer somewhere; “*to make himself last of all, and servant of all.*”

— Finally, the greatest act of humility is to acknowledge that our personal greatness does not come just from ourselves; it comes from childlike simplicity before God. And therefore we should **pray!** Generously to allocate time for prayer, quiet reflection, liturgy, Mass and adoration is a *life-giving act of humility*. The sacrifice of one's time to give to God in prayer is a profound statement that *He is our loving Father*, and that we need to take time, space, and peace, to show Him our childlike devotion. Let's not repeat the mantra that we are ‘too busy to pray’; to do so is to pretend that we are self-sufficient, in no real need of humbling ourselves before God. *But we do need Him.* And we need His gentle guidance, and we need to heed that insistence from the Lord that never humiliates, but invites humility to our benefit and blessing: “*Come to Me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest.*”