

St Mary's Concord
A Reflection based on the Homily for
25th Sunday of Ordinary Time
19 September 2021

READINGS YEAR B: Wisdom 2:12, 17-20; James 3:16 – 4:3; Mark 9:30-37

To contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus all churches have been closed since 26 June 2021. One Mass is permitted so that it can be livestreamed to the parish YouTube channel and to the parish Facebook page: "St Mary's Parish Church Concord". The following reflection is based on the homily from that Mass.

In any war there are always innocent people who are killed or injured. They are what Governments and military planners euphemistically call collateral damage. The unintentional victims of acts of war. But violence is taken to another level when innocent people themselves become the targets.

Every day we hear about individuals, political groups and even governments, who use violence to impose their will on innocent people. Sadly, it is not new. It seems to be part of the human condition.

The Book of Wisdom, for example, reflects on how those in power use violence to oppress anyone who challenges them. As we heard in the first reading, "The godless say, let us lie in wait for the righteous one, who makes life inconvenient for us and opposes our actions..... Let us test him with insult and torture."

While it is easy to identify those who openly use violence to silence their critics, there are other situations where the use of violence is more hidden. We can think of bullying in the workplace or in the home and abusive behaviour on various social media platforms.

In recent weeks several high-profile journalists have closed their Twitter accounts because of the constant abuse they have received. Sadly, we know that social media is used by many to bully and abuse others. Some people use the mask of anonymity that social media offers to attack others in ways that undermine civil discourse.

The author of the Letter of James, as we have seen in recent weeks, was also concerned about conflict in his community. In our second reading we heard him challenge his community. "Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from?" he asks. In his view, many acts of violence come from envy, greed and selfishness. He goes on to say, "You want something and cannot obtain it, so you engage in disputes and conflicts."

How often when we are attacked, do we find ourselves fighting back so that the violence and abuse becomes a vicious circle. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus breaks out of that vicious circle of violence.

When Jesus spoke of the persecution awaiting him in Jerusalem, his disciples did not understand. As we have seen over recent weeks, they thought that the Messiah would come among them as a powerful leader. Their focus was on how they would benefit, and so they argued among themselves: who would be the greatest. But as we have also seen, Jesus was offering another way, not the path of power but of service.

As they gathered in the house at Capernaum, Jesus called over a small child and embracing the child he told them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." The disciples had failed to understand and of course we also fail to understand because for us a child represents innocence. But in first century Palestine, a small child represented those who were powerless.

We, like the disciples, want to hang on to power. We want to maintain our independence and in our relationships that often is expressed by our need to be in control. And so, when Jesus said "whoever welcomes such a child, welcomes me", he identified himself with the powerless. He is turning the values of the world up-side-down.

In this world, to have power is to be in control. It takes various forms: physical power, emotional power, financial power. Sadly, it is only when we lose our independence through illness or growing frailty, that we begin to understand that we need trust others. And ultimately, as we accept that we do not control our ultimate destiny, we learn to trust in God's care for us.

And it is not only individual believers who need to learn that lesson. Throughout history, Christian communities have held positions of power in the wider society. When that has happened, the Mission of the Church often became more concerned with maintaining that power and influence. In extreme cases Church leaders used their power to persecute anyone who opposed them.

Next Sunday, as we continue to follow Jesus and the disciples in Mark's Gospel, we will hear about the disciples wanting to protect their power. We will also be reminded that we are called to be the servants of God's Spirit not the controllers of the Spirit.

To be a Servant Church, we need to be open to where the Spirit is leading us. Otherwise, we risk hearing the same criticism that the writer of the Letter of James directed towards his community: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your own pleasures."

Perhaps the question for us is not "What do we need?" but rather "Who are we called to be?"

Paul Crowley
Parish Priest