

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Feb 8th 2014

Two different prayer threads occur to me today from the readings.

The excerpt from Kings is a wonderful example of what we would call the servant leader, the person who puts the needs of his people above his own. Here is Solomon, presented with the opportunity to request any gift imaginable, and he seeks not something for himself, but to have the understanding to be a better servant for his people. God rewards him not only with what he requested, but untold bounty in other areas.

This gift of an understanding heart is one that would benefit all of us. Think of your own little corner of the world – how much better would it be if other people would listen to and understand you; how much more smoothly things would run if you were in charge! But wait – Solomon didn't ask that others understand him better, but rather that his own heart be more sensitive so he could better know what his people needed. We certainly can see leaders today in both public and private life that would be more effective if they had an understanding heart, but it is not in our power to make that happen.

What we can do is make our own hearts more understanding – by taking the time to listen, by seeking to place ourselves in the shoes of the other, by thinking of how an action will impact someone else before we think of what might hold for us. It seems to me that an understanding heart grows with practicing understanding, and shrinks with self-centeredness.

Earlier in Mark's Chapter 6, Jesus sent the apostles on a mission, to travel the country preaching, healing, and anointing. In this excerpt they return and report to Jesus. I can imagine them being excited, perhaps energized, but also drained and ready for a rest. I can hear them energetically reporting to Jesus what they had seen and done, each trying to top the other with good news, perhaps not sure if they were doing exactly what he wanted, perhaps looking for approval from him for their decisions. But the overall theme seems to be that they are hungry and tired. Jesus invites them to rest, but it doesn't seem that the people will let them. Even as they try to separate themselves for just a little time, more and more people are coming to hear the message Jesus is bringing.

I can relate to the human feelings of the apostles. This time of year is always very busy for me, and always has been in my professional life. Tax professionals are busy in tax season. We do what we need to do, and then try to get away for a little rest, and then go back the next day and do it again. We all have those busy times of year when it seems something crowds out all the other things we want to be doing in our lives. We get hungry and tired and don't think we can do more.

Jonas Salk, the inventor of the polio vaccine named after him, said when he received the Congressional Medal for Distinguished Civilian Achievement in 1956, "The greatest reward for doing is the

opportunity to do more.” I think most of us have said at one time or another when confronted with a troubling, or emotionally draining, or other situation where we feel limited in our powers that “I wish I could do more.” Yet the example we see from Jesus is not to say it, but to just do it. Jesus found the strength to meet the needs of those who came to him when the apostles needed to rest. Jesus understood in his heart that more needed to be done and that he could do it.

One lesson for me in this story is that when I am at the end of my power to act, I can always turn to Jesus for him to take over. That is comforting, and what Jesus tells us he wants to do – come to him when we feel burdened. But another lesson is that the problem for me, and perhaps some of you, is in having the strength to allow Jesus to take over. We are like the apostles – we want to have control and don’t want to admit we might be powerless to act. We might be tired and hungry, but we would rather cling to that tiredness than admit we should give in and allow Jesus to comfort us with his solace and sustenance. Jesus wants to be the shepherd who steps in to lead us when we feel this way, and we want to resist by being foolish and self-centered. We want to close our heart to understanding that we can do more by giving up our selves to the greater love of Jesus.

And so my prayer today is for the gift of two graces from God – to become more understanding by being more understanding, and to have the strength to let go so Jesus can help me.

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