

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Mar 13th 2015

“Let him who is wise understand these things; let him who is prudent know them.”

“And when Jesus saw that he answered with understanding, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the Kingdom of God.’”

In my last ministry position with the House of Brigid in Wexford, we led many confirmation retreats. Confirmation in Ireland is usually done at age 11 or 12 when the 6th Class students move from primary school to secondary school. It is a societal rite of passage, a graduation from primary school, in addition to a rite of passage into an adult faith life in the Church. Naturally, the 12-year-olds tended to be more excited about the societal trappings - new clothes, generous gifts, big family parties, bouncy castles at said parties - than they were about continuing in their faith lives as adults. The retreats were intended to get them thinking more about the sacrament.

Most of the retreat was centered around the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, which they had all memorized in school. When we prompted them to tell us about the gifts, they had a hard time articulating the differences. And who could blame them? Three of the gifts have names that we use almost interchangeably: wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. That part of the talk usually went like this:

Me: “Who can tell me what the gift of ‘wisdom’ is?”

Candidates: “You’re wise when you know a lot of things.” “No, a wise person understands things!”

Me: “Ok then, who can tell me what the gift of ‘knowledge’ is?”

Candidates: “Knowledge is when you know about things.” “Ah, when you understand things!”

Me: “You mean like knowing the answers on your maths exams? Knowing information?”

Candidates: “Yes!”

Me: “So when you get confirmed, you won’t have to study for maths anymore, because you’ll have knowledge?”

Candidates: “Um... well, no...”

Me: “What about the gift of ‘understanding?’”

Candidates: “That’s when you know stuff, and you get it.” “No, that’s when you can understand how someone is feeling.”

Me: “You mean you can sympathize with someone? As in, ‘to be understanding’ towards someone else?”

Candidates: “Yeah, like that.”

The catechism is supremely unhelpful in defining the difference between these words in the section about the gifts of the Holy Spirit. On the retreat, we put them all in the context of a growing relationship with God. These gifts are seeds and would continue to grow throughout their faith lives. To be wise is to desire a relationship with God. The gift of knowledge allows us to learn about God and about ourselves, and to discern God’s will for us. The gift of understanding allows us to see truth in that knowledge, and leads us into loving relationship with God. Perhaps it is in this context, where the scribe in the Gospel replies with love for God, that Jesus says, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.”

Molly Mattingly - Creighton University's Campus Ministry