

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Sep 20th 2015

“‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ But they remained silent.”

In the silence that follows the simple question of Jesus, we cringe along with the disciples, almost intuiting the truth which comes then to explicit expression: “They had been discussing among themselves on the way who was the greatest.” Not having understood Jesus’ second prediction of his passion (and with it, the implication that their own lives would be drawn into that passion), they relate to one another in very human terms and according to human logic: If there’s a group, someone has to be on top!

The name given by the Letter of James to this all-too-human manner of thinking and acting is “selfish ambition,” which breeds, according to that same Letter, “disorder and every foul practice.” No small thing, this worrying about who is the greatest! James’ diagnosis of human discord, illustrated by Jesus’ friends, points to a disease that afflicts all human hearts, but one that has a particular effect on those closest to Jesus.

Focus on self remains in direct opposition to focus on God. No one can move toward God who remains focused on the self. The spiritual tradition of eastern Christianity names *philautia*, the love of self, as the “queen of all vices.” This remains true for all, but what of those “closest to Jesus”?

In a passage of his apostolic exhortation on evangelization, Pope Francis speaks to all those who work “in and for the Church,” cautioning them about the temptation to “spiritual worldliness.” That is, he warns about attitudes and behaviors that seek “not the Lord’s glory but human glory and personal well-being.” This, he goes on to say, can take on many forms, depending on the kinds of persons and groups into which it seeps. How can we avoid this? Pope Francis: “. . . by making the Church constantly go out from herself, keeping her mission focused on Jesus Christ, and her commitment to the poor.”

For all, but especially those who work “in and for the Church,” the gospel asks us to pay attention to the focus of our love: Love of self? Or love of Jesus and those whom he loves?

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