

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Feb 21st 2017

Jesus and his three selected apostles have just come down from the mountain and right after the transfiguration experience Jesus starts talking about suffering, about his passion and death. The apostles do not get it, possibly because they do not want to get it. They are in denial. So, we are told, they are afraid to ask, perhaps thinking that what you do not know won't hurt you. They are not whistling in the dark, they are just not even whistling. Instead, they start arguing about who is "number one" among them.

Jesus does not reproach them for wanting to be number one. Indeed, Jesus challenges them –and us– to desire to rank first. But he teaches them a new way of ranking first, namely, first in service: if anyone wishes to be first, he shall be last of all and the servant of all. Then, engaging in some "show and tell", Jesus places a child in front of them and he tells them: if you want to be first, welcome those who are like children.

Childhood is not an absolute, it is a life stage meant to be outgrown. The message is not: be childish, i.e. stunted in your growth, but rather: be childlike and welcome those who are childlike. A child is powerless, yet trusting, and we are asked to welcome the powerless, those whose hearts are open to hope. We are seeing this in Pope Francis, for whom his position is not a position of power, and we hear it also in his words.

Now, there are many powerless persons in this world and yet, when we think of the powerless, we usually do not think first of a particular experience of powerlessness that at some point in life touches most of us. Being sick is a radical experience of powerlessness and so is having a loved one who is sick. In serving the sick, who are powerless, we are ranked first in Jesus' eyes. We are working with the right kind of constituency and in welcoming them, in welcoming any powerless person, we welcome him. And in welcoming him, we welcome the One who sent him.

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