

First or Last

Texts: Exodus 17:1-7

Philippians 2:1-13 (Series A. 17 Sunday after Pentecost) Ps. 78:1-4, 12-16

Matthew 21:23-32

**"The last shall be first and the first shall be last" Matthew 20:16
God comes to you through other persons.**

Prayer:

God's ways are not our ways. God's thoughts are not our thoughts. "As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are My ways above your ways and My thoughts above your thoughts;" thus says the Lord in the Book of Isaiah, Chapter 55:9. The truth of this Divine statement is nowhere more apparent than in today's Gospel Lesson in which Jesus says, "*the last shall be first and the first shall be last*" (Mt.20:16).

It is undisputable *Gospel Truth*. And it is in that context that it is placed before us today. Jesus says, "*The last shall be first and the first shall be last,*" and that is the Gospel Truth.

I think the challenge of the gospel lesson today is to think about all those many ways we respond without thinking, without connecting, without really seeing – those times when we act out of fear of losing face and status rather than acting out of compassion and truth regardless of the cost.

The chief priests and the elders wanted to challenge Jesus – they didn't like how he was connecting with those who, in their society, had been tossed aside; they didn't like how Jesus was seeing people's pain and acting to heal; they didn't like how he set aside the rules, in favour of acting out of concern for the truth.

So, they asked him a question about the source of his authority, not because they wanted so much to know the answer, but because they wanted to get him into more trouble. Instead of answering their trick question, he tosses the ball back into their court.

Jesus asks them about where the baptism “*that John proclaimed*” came from. It was an equally tricky question - they couldn’t answer, not because they didn’t know the truth, but because they were afraid of the consequences of their answer.

Jesus refuses then to play their game. In the next section Jesus uses a parable to help them understand his way in the world. Jesus challenges those who say, “No,” to so much – those who are numbed to the needs around them and who will not accept his new teaching of compassion and love, he challenges them with a story. Jesus shows them that the son who says, “No,” at first, but then does what the father asks, does the right thing.

This is what concerns Jesus about his own people in today's Gospel Lesson. He is talking to his fellow Jews about this because they are fond of looking down on “*outsiders*.” They have grown accustomed to regarding themselves as God's favorites and to classifying most others as “*enemy*.”

And Jesus is trying to lead them into a more enlightened perspective on God's ways. “***The last shall be first and the first shall be last.***” Jesus is telling them that the real exaltation that they see as their destiny will not be realized until they have paid the price. They must bear the cost of acknowledging that the spotlight of God's love shines on every human being. That is our Gospel Lesson! The light of God's love encircles the whole human race: ***No exceptions.***

Until our faith in this *Gospel Truth* is expressed in our life-style, in all of our relationships, we haven't paid the price and our search for the stairway to the Kingdom of God will proceed in darkness.

The light of God's love can quench the shadows which now cause us to distinguish “*friend*” from “*foe*.” St. John says this beautifully in his Letter: *The man who continues in the light is the one who loves his brother and sister; ... but the man who hates his brother or sister is in darkness. He walks in shadows, not knowing where he is going, since the dark has blinded his eyes.* (1 Jn.2:10,11).

The God, who wants to raise you and me up to fullness of life and who has come in Jesus Christ to show us this life, is offering it to us in the here and now. God is not calling you and me to withdraw from the world to some holy existence above the mess and the grime and the sweat.

No! God offers us fullness of life right where you are - wherever we are. He offers fullness of life in the give-and-take, the level-and-trenches of this world. He offers us fullness of life in the laughter and in the tears, in the coming together and in the separation, in the joy and in the sorrow, in the easy relationships and in the difficult relationships.

God comes to you, and he comes to me, through the hardness of the *rocks* and on the *wind* that blows off the sea and in the cool rain that falls from above. But, more significantly, God comes to us through other persons. Oh yes! **"We are who we are because of other people."** That is God's way. **"The last shall be first and the first shall be last."** Who is last on your list these days? Isn't there something we can do this week to heal that broken relationship?

The Quakers tell the story of one of their members who put up a sign on a vacant piece of ground next to his house. The sign read, **"I Will Give This Lot to Anyone Who Is Really Satisfied!"** A wealthy farmer rode by, read the sign, and then went to the owner's house. He said to the Quaker, "I may as well have the land you are offering because I qualify: I am rich. I have everything I need. I am satisfied."

"Art thou truly satisfied?" the Quaker asked.

"Yes, I have everything I need, and I am well satisfied," said the rich man.

"My friend," said the Quaker, **"if thou art satisfied, why does thou want my land?"**

In the Gospels, Jesus gives us a sign that reads, "I will give peace of mind and heart and soul; I will give contentment to all persons who acknowledge the *Gospel Truth* of a loving God who wants them to express their love for him through their love for one another." God is Love!

Humility, in the face of all that God has done, is part of Paul's message. Jesus reminds us that it isn't always the high and mighty legal eagles that have all of the answers. Stop, breathe, hear, and listen. The message – the Word – is simple enough for everyone to understand. Let us each remember, when we're on that road paved with good intentions, pay attention. Who we think we are might surprise us. We are not what we say we'll do. We are what we do.

I ask God to lift up our mind and heart. Let our soul soar to that faintest of heights, where there is no one to look down on. And, in God's Wisdom, that is enough for now. Be satisfied ... Be content! Try it God's way - and enjoy his peace. But for me, this week's readings say, *God is here, where am I?* Faith is as faith *does*; actions *always* tell the tale.

Jesus teaches that there is time to change your mind, there is time to get it right – there is time to do what God is calling you to do. There is time to change your actions - there is time to move from judgment to compassion, from rules to justice. In a few minutes, some of us are going to celebrate the sacrament of Communion – a meal shared around the world today in many Christian communities.

It is a meal that reminds us all of God's very indwelling, God's very concrete action of nurturing and feeding - of forgiveness and blessing. Every meal is an opportunity; it is a time to experience God anew, to experience a change of mind and heart - a time to reset to the ways of God. May we have the courage to live lives of compassion and justice. May we have the wisdom to change our minds for the sake of the gospel. Amen.

**May the peace of God which passes all understanding
keep your heart and soul in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

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