

Homily for September 20, 2009 (25th Sunday in Ordinary Time, B)
Wis 2:12, 17-20; Ps 54:3-8; Jas 3:16-4:3; Mk 9:30-37

Last month, thousands of members of the Knights of Peter Claver and their Ladies Auxiliary gathered in New Orleans to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the “KPC’s,” as they’re popularly known. It’s not coincidental that the Knights were founded in 1909, the same year as the NAACP. The same racism that relegated many Blacks to the “colored” sections of trains and theatres also pushed them into the balconies of Catholic churches.

Indeed, one reason that the Knights of Peter Claver were founded is because African Americans were denied membership in the Knights of Columbus. The celebration in New Orleans, then, was a time to thank God for bringing them and the wider Black Catholic community “a mighty long way” and to gather strength for the journey that still remains.

The patron of the KPC’s, St. Peter Claver, ministered primarily in the 17th century and was canonized in 1888. Born in Spain, he became a Jesuit, was ordained a priest, and was sent to serve in Cartagena (now part of Colombia), then an important port and slave market in the New World.

It’s hard to convey in words the horrific and inhuman conditions of slave ships. Historians estimate that up to half of those who slaves who started the Middle Passage from Africa to the New World didn’t make it. Those who did were considered property and exploited and abused in a variety of ways. After being stacked and lying like cordwood in the bowels of ships for weeks, they arrived in Cartagena frightened, filthy, and sick.

St. Peter Claver, who committed his life to being “slave to the slaves,” went out to the ships as they arrived. After taking care of his brothers’ and sisters’ basic needs (food, water, bathing, etc.) he used pictures and simple words to preach the Gospel to them and catechize them before baptizing them. It is said that he baptized up to 300,000 people! He later tried to minister to them and defend their rights in the plantations and mines.

The work was exhausting; and eventually Peter succumbed to one of the plagues that spread so frequently and rapidly on the ships. He spent the last four years of his life in bed, largely neglected and even scorned by others, including his Jesuit brothers, before he finally died at the age of 74. Like many saints, his holiness and work were honored only after he died.

Some “sophisticated” or “educated” folks today might look askance at St. Peter Claver’s way of evangelizing, catechizing and baptizing people who likely knew little if anything about Christianity or Catholic doctrine. But they could tell compassion and kindness when they saw it. It wasn’t hard to make a connection between the man offering them food, drink and medicine and the man they saw on the cross—the same one we just heard in the gospel say, “If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.” Maybe that’s all they needed.

Our culture tells us that we become great by elevating and promoting ourselves, even if it means dismissing, disrespecting, and oppressing others. But as he so often does, Jesus “flips the script” of popular opinion. Instead he tells us—and throughout the gospels shows us—that we become great by making others greater. If you think about it, isn’t that part of what being a parent, spouse, teacher, supervisor, or pastor is all about?

Yet it’s a hard lesson to learn. It’s part of the reason that we have dysfunctional families, schools, businesses, and churches. In our second reading, James addresses just such churches. “Where jealousy and selfish ambition exits,” he observes, “there is disorder and every foul practice.” Jealousy and selfish ambition are the products of out-of-control egos.

By placing ourselves in the center of the universe, we have to put a lot of effort into making sure that everyone and everything around us are properly in orbit and obedient to our gravitational pull! When they aren’t, we have a few options: intimidate or manipulate them back into their “place;” ignore or marginalize them; or destroy them.

We see these dynamics at play in our first reading from Wisdom 3, when faced with “the just one” and his righteousness, the wicked set out to revile, torture, put him to the test, and finally “condemn him to a shameful death.” Centuries after it was written for a Jewish audience, the early Christian community came to understand Jesus as “the just one.”

Choosing to be “last of all and servant of all” is not easy; and it isn’t always immediately rewarding. But it is the way of Christ. It is the way in which “the fruit of righteousness” that is “sown in peace for those who cultivate peace.” It is the picture that St. Peter Claver painted with his life. It is the way of discipleship...and the way to eternal life. +