

25th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR B

It was an embarrassing moment. A woman was on her feet talking, as she had been for the previous forty-five minutes. At the back of the hall a man nudged his neighbour and very ungallantly whispered: “Just listen to her; she doesn’t know when to stop. The man who married her must have been mad.” And back came the devastating reply: “No, she doesn’t; and yes, I must have been.”

Today’s Gospel tells of an embarrassing moment for the Lord’s disciples. They were on their way to Jerusalem with Jesus, and he was telling them about the terrible fate that awaited him. However, their thoughts were elsewhere. They were busy arguing among themselves about which of them was greatest. At the end of the day’s journey, Jesus suddenly enquires what they have been talking about on the way. There’s an awkward silence, the silence of shame, of embarrassment. So long as they thought he was paying no attention, their discussions about greatness seemed harmless enough, but now they realize how mean and unworthy it had all been – their talking about greatness while he’s talking about going to his death. How could they?

They could – because as with the rest of us, there was a shadow side to their personalities. It’s a point that St. James makes in today’s second reading. He speaks of a war going on inside us: on the one hand, the spirit of unselfishness which leads to harmony and peace, to compassion and holiness; on the other the spirit of selfishness which gives rise to jealousies and ambitions, to squabbles, and even to murder.

It’s significant that when Jesus found his friends displaying this selfish side, he didn’t give them the telling off they deserved. Instead, he showed them where true greatness lies – not in striving to be first but in being ready to be last, not by being master, but by being servant, not by following selfish instincts but by being truly unselfish. He took a small child and put his arms around him. A small child has no real power or influence; it’s a symbol of those who stand in need of help. And Jesus continues: if you welcome those represented by this child – the little people, the poor, the marginalized, the forgotten ones – then it’s me you’re welcoming. Service of the sick, the lonely, the rejected, is to be characteristic of Christ’s followers.

If you ask why Mother Theresa of Calcutta was one of the most admired women in the world, it wasn’t because she won the Nobel Peace Prize or

countless other awards, it was because throughout her long life she served the poorest of the poor in heroic fashion. She was a truly selfless person. She did beautiful things for God.

But of course you don't have to be a Mother Theresa. A lovely story is told of a honeymoon couple whose car broke down and had to be abandoned. It was an isolated spot – no hotels, no boarding houses. In the distance, they saw a glimmer of light in a cottage window. They knocked at the door and asked if they could possibly stay the night. “Anywhere will do” they insisted, “even the floor.” The old couple noticed some strands of confetti in the young bride's hand luggage and, with a smile, they replied: “You're welcome; you can have the guest room.” The following morning the young couple rose early and moved quietly out of their room, anxious not to waken their hosts. Imagine their surprise when they saw the old woman lying on a sofa and her husband curled up in an armchair. They had no guest room; they'd given up their own bedroom to the strangers.

Unselfishness! It helps us to understand what Jesus – and James too – are getting at. There is that hard wedge of selfishness at the heart of each of us, an “I'm alright Jack” attitude which can easily blind us to the needs of others. Jesus begs us to take the focus off ourselves, to try, at least sometimes, to achieve the greatness of putting others first. If we do not, then one day we shall have our most embarrassing moment, as we face the Lord and have to admit we did not even recognize him in our needy brother or sister. If on the other hand we do that, then we shall discover that in our own small way we have done some beautiful things for God.