



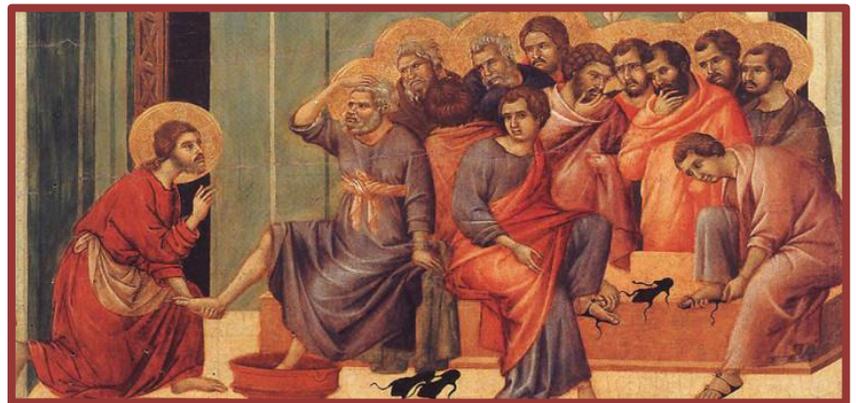
Today's Gospel (Mark 9:30-37) carries us into the middle of a private conference between Jesus and the twelve Apostles. Jesus is teaching his Apostles a very crucial lesson about life. He is teaching them the way to live a truly great and meaningful life. At the same time, he is teaching them what it means to be leaders in the Church. This "teaching moment" occurs when Jesus overhears his Apostles arguing over who is the greatest among them. He sits down, calls the twelve to gather around Him and He says, "If anyone wishes to rank first, he must remain the last one of all and the servant of all." Then, to demonstrate his point, he brings a child into their midst puts his arms around him and says, "Whoever welcomes a child like this for my sake welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the One who sent me."

What is Jesus saying? In those days a child was considered the lowest, the weakest, the most powerless and needy member of society. Jesus' point is clear: greatness is achieved not by counting oneself superior to others, but by becoming the servant to ALL – especially the very least in the eyes of society. Furthermore, Jesus implies that the way we treat the least among us is the way we treat both Jesus and God the Father who sent him! Jesus shows affection for the child by putting his arms around him and making him feel welcomed, loved, and cared for. He then exhorts his disciples to consider the radical truth: what we do to the least we do to him! In loving and serving the least, we are loving and serving Jesus himself!

In the Second Reading for today's Mass (James 3:16-4:3), St. James recounts the devastating effects of NOT living as Jesus taught:

"For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice. But the wisdom from above is first of all pure, then peaceable, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without inconstancy or insincerity. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace for those who cultivate peace. Where do the wars and where do the conflicts among you come from? Is it not from your passions that make war within your members? You covet but do not possess. You kill and envy but you cannot obtain; you fight and wage war. You do not possess because you do not ask. You ask but do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." (James 3:16–4:3, NAB)

Perhaps the Saint who most perfectly took to heart Jesus's exhortation to "remain the last one of all" and the "servant of all" is St. Francis of Assisi (besides the Blessed Virgin Mary of course!). St. Francis famously never allowed himself to consider anyone as his inferior; rather he strove, and quite successfully, to be in mind and heart not the superior but the servant to every human being. G.K. Chesterton summarizes the effects of Francis' beautiful life as only he could:



"St. Francis walked the world like the Pardon of God. I mean that his appearance marked the moment when men could be reconciled not only to God but to nature and, most difficult of all, to themselves. . . . in short, the coming of St. Francis was like the birth of a child in a dark house, lifting its doom; a child that grows up unconscious of the tragedy in the house, and triumphs over it by his innocence . . . It was such an amnesty and reconciliation that the freshness of the Franciscan spirit brought to all the world." G.K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*.

The Apostles were privileged to learn directly from Jesus that the true measure of our love of God and neighbor is determined by the way we welcome and serve the least among us. May the good Lord help us today to see the importance and beauty of this profound lesson that we too may strive to be authentic disciples of Christ.

Your Servant in Christ,
Fr. Terry Staples