

September 20, 2015 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

### **Bishop Bradley's Reflections on the Sunday Readings**

On this gorgeous late summer September day, with only 2 days left until summer ends and fall begins, and also, coincidentally, only 2 days until Pope Francis lands in Washington, D.C. to begin his historic Pastoral Visit to the United States, we come together to celebrate the great gift of our Faith. While there is much speculation as to what Pope Francis' message will be to all Americans during his 6 days visiting 3 major cities, speaking to a joint session of Congress (Washington), the United Nations General Assembly (New York City), and the World Meeting of Families (Philadelphia), we can be certain that our Holy Father will be reminding us how precious the gift of Faith is, and how we all need to be renewed in the belief in and practice of our Faith in Jesus and our participation in the life of the Church. I very much look forward to traveling to Washington tomorrow where I, along with 300+ Bishops from across the United States will have the great privilege of praying with Pope Francis at St. Matthew Cathedral in Washington on Wednesday morning and listening to the special message he will deliver to us at that time. I am particularly looking forward to being a part of a small delegation of Bishops who will be privileged to greet the Holy Father on behalf of all the other Bishops, and I fully intend to convey to Pope Francis the prayers, good wishes and loyalty of the Faithful members of the Diocese of Kalamazoo. May each of us, and all Americans, have truly open hearts and minds to hear the message of renewal of our faith that Pope Francis will speak to our country, and the willingness to act upon it.

In today's Gospel passage, we see that Jesus Himself was having a difficult time in communicating His message to the Apostles. They heard what He said; but they did not really listen with a child-like openness or willingness of spirit. For the last few weeks, our Gospel passages for our Sunday Masses have been taken from the Gospel of Mark. In this mid-way section of Mark's Gospel, Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem, and He is focused on what awaits Him there: His suffering, death and resurrection. He has been trying to make sure that His disciples/apostles understand not only what is about to happen, but how Jesus will accomplish the salvation of the world. If you remember last week's Gospel, Jesus asked the Apostles Who the people thought He was, and Who they thought He was? That's when Jesus told them very directly that He was going to

Jerusalem where He would be arrested, tortured, put to death, and then after three days, rise from the dead. That led to a very pointed conversation between Jesus and Peter in which Jesus had to make it very clear to Peter that he was *“thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.”*

In today’s Gospel passage, which follows just a few verses after last week’s, Jesus tells the apostles the same thing: *“The Son of Man is to be handed over to men and they will kill Him, and three days after His death, the Son of Man will rise.”* St. Mark tells us: *“But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to question Him.”* Mark then gives us a bit of a clue as to why they didn’t “understand”. They were not paying any attention to what Jesus was saying, as important as it was, because they were too busy discussing/arguing among themselves about which of them was the most important, the greatest, the one who would be Jesus’ “right hand man” when He claimed the Messianic Victory. Obviously the apostles, in spite of the fact that they were with Jesus day-in and day-out, were so “conditioned” by the “human” understanding of “power” and “victory” and “greatness” that they could simply not yet grasp what Jesus was trying so desperately to teach them.

That is why Jesus called them all together, sat them down, and gave them a frank lesson about “greatness” and “discipleship”. *“If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.”*

That is a life-long challenge for each of us. No matter who we are, we need to keep reminding ourselves what it means for us to be “followers” of Christ. What does that mean for us in terms of the way I live my daily life? What does that mean in the way I try to grow as a person---the kind of person I want to be, and the kind of person God wants me to be? What does that mean in the way I live my vocation, practice my profession, pursue my career and fulfill my work responsibilities? What does that mean in the way I try to be a faithful citizen and the way I am involved in the political process? These are challenging questions, and ones that we have to pray about and ponder.

And so Jesus decided to call a little child into their midst, put His loving arms around that child, and gave them a “show and tell” kind of a very clear lesson: *“Whoever receives one child such as this in My Name, receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me, but the One who sent Me.”*

What Jesus is teaching is a very hard lesson; we can understand it, but it's quite hard to accept it and live it. What Jesus teaches flies in the face of everything we have been taught in the ways of "the world" when it comes to "greatness" and "worldly success". We tend to think of "greatness" and "success" as being associated with material gain, worldly advancement, making lots of money, living in a huge house, driving the fanciest car, and being able to retire early and travel the world. What Jesus teaches us is that REAL success has to do with the kind of person we become; HE is the "Model"---the real-life example of who God wants us to be.

Who are the people in your life who you really admire and respect? Aren't they the people, like your parents who have practiced self-sacrifice all their lives, or those who struggle each day with huge problems yet insist always on doing the right thing---in other words, those who live their lives as Jesus teaches us to live?

Are these two understandings of "greatness" mutually exclusive? Not necessarily! It is possible to be "great" in the ways of the world and "great" in the ways Jesus leads us to live. But it's eternally more important to choose to be "great" and "successful" as Jesus has taught us to be.

Today's Scripture Readings remind us that we need to keep "learning", no matter how old we are, or how "smart" we might be in other ways. I think that will also be the message that Pope Francis will be sharing with us this coming week---to be strong in our faith---to be courageous in the ways we live our faith---and to always live our faith with joy. Please pray for our Holy Father's safety and security. May Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, the Patroness of our Country, watch over Pope Francis and all those who will be engaged in this week of spiritual renewal. Let us pray today that God will keep our hearts open to all that He wants to teach us, especially, as we hear Jesus clearly teach us that to be truly "great", we must willingly, joyfully and generously serve the needs of all.

God bless you, now and always.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

+ Bishop Paul J. Bradley