

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – September 23, 2018
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Over the course of the last week, workplace violence has broken out at three American companies. There were stabbings of a random jogger in the nation's capital and of five people in a home day care center in Syracuse. A police shooting is under investigation in our own city. These episodes are merely a reflection of the violent nature of our world today. There is conflict in almost every corner of the globe – rivalries based on economic status, political power, ethnic heritage, and even religion. Some years ago, Pope Benedict XVI was caught up in this conflict. He had tried to challenge scholars to see the harmony between authentic faith and human reason – a harmony that is a hallmark of Catholic scholastic theology. Instead of listening to him or engaging in fruitful dialogue, his message got picked apart by the media and his point was lost in a conflict with Islamic leaders. In short, we live in times where all too often humans solve problems not with dialogue, but with violence. Jealousy, envy and ambition are plentiful, but gentleness, mercy and peace seem to be in short supply.

If our readings today prove anything, it is that human nature hasn't changed much. Though they may seem to have been ripped from today's headlines, they were actually written some nineteen hundred to two thousand years ago. The last book of the Old Testament to be written, the Book of Wisdom was composed about 50 years before the birth of Jesus. In the passage we heard today, the author gives voice to the wicked – to those who would test the just one with revilement, torture and death. It must have seemed to those first Christians, to those contemporaries of Jesus to have perfectly described the terrible events of Christ's Passion. Yet violence, wickedness and injustice did not stop on Good Friday. The Letter of James was probably composed in the last decades of the first century – some fifty years or so after the death and resurrection of the Lord. James's Christian community was beginning to experience official persecution, but was also beset by internal dissension – by jealousy and ambition among their members. He contrasts such attitudes with wisdom – that divine revelation from above which cooperates with human reason. True wisdom, St. James reminds us, yields peace, mercy, and gentleness. But true wisdom seemed to be as elusive in the time of the letter of James as it had been some 125 years earlier when the Book of Wisdom was written. Surely Jesus, who came between the two, had managed to banish such thoughts from his disciples. Surely Jesus ushered in a time of complete harmony and peace. Well, not exactly.

As the gospel passage shows us, the disciples were fully human. After the disciples heard the disturbing news that Jesus was aware of his own impending Passion and death, you might have imagined that they would spend the time trying to console Jesus or support him, or ask him what rising from the dead meant. That's what we would have done, we tell ourselves. Yet the disciples were afraid to question him – they didn't want to hear any more of this talk of death. And so they busied themselves by arguing which among them was the greatest. Even Jesus himself could not banish selfish thoughts from their minds. Instead, he challenged them – and he challenges us – to look beyond ourselves – not to determine if we are the greatest, but to offer ourselves in service to the least. In Jesus' time – and often in ours – that meant children. A child is vulnerable and dependent – a vulnerability that is too often exploited by self-absorbed adults. Rather than exploitation or abuse, a child needs the care and protection of an adult, a child is entitled to such protection. Caring for a child, indeed caring for anyone else, necessarily means putting their needs before our own. It means that we have to take second place or third place or tenth place. It means that we cannot be the greatest. And Jesus tells us that it is only when we care for another in need, it is only when we receive a child in charity and compassion, that we receive God. It is in opening ourselves to another that we open ourselves to God and to his love. As long as we remain focused upon ourselves, upon our own comfort and our own desires, then we will have missed the opportunity to encounter Christ – in the poor, in the vulnerable, in those we might consider our enemies. Peace – in our hearts and in our homes, in our city and in our world – true peace will never be obtained through tactical advantage or by the force of our will. True peace is only possible by humble surrender to the will of God, by seeing Christ in one another, and by receiving all – the powerful and the powerless – the rich and the poor alike – by receiving all with mercy and compassion. As history has shown us, it is a challenge that seems to run contrary to our human nature – but by following the path that Jesus laid out, we can allow God to heal our frail human nature and make it more like that of our Creator. For all of our technological advancements, humans are still the same envious and ambitious lot we see depicted in our readings today. For more than five thousand years, we humans have tried to solve our own problems. Maybe it is time for us to give God a chance.