

Heavenly Wisdom

Homily for September 19, 2021

25th Sunday Ordinary Time

At the Olympic Games in Paris in 1924 the sport of canoe racing was added to the list of international competitions. The favorite team in the four-man canoe race was the United States team. One member of that team was a young man by the name of Bill Havens.

As the time for the Olympics neared, it became clear that Bill's wife would give birth to their first child about the time that Bill would be competing in the Paris Games. In 1924 there were no jet airliners from Paris to the United States, only slow-moving ocean-going ships. And so Bill found himself in a dilemma. Should he go to Paris and risk not being at his wife's side when their first child was born? Or should he withdraw from the team and remain behind. Bill's wife insisted that he go to Paris. After all, he had been working towards this for all these years. It was the culmination of a life-long dream.

Clearly the decision was not easy for Bill to make. Finally, after much soul searching, Bill decided to withdraw from the competition and remain behind with his wife so that he could be with her when their first child arrived. Bill considered being at her side a higher priority than going to Paris to fulfill a life-long dream.

The United States four-man canoe team won the gold medal at the Paris Olympics. And Bill's wife was late in giving birth to their child. She was so late that Bill could have competed in the event and returned home in time to be with her when she gave birth.

People said, "What a shame." But Bill said he had no regrets. After all, his commitment to his wife was more important. Bill Havens paid a high price to fulfill a commitment to the one he loved.

This theme of what motivates the way we think and live is at the heart of today's readings. In the Gospel for today the Lord is inspiring the apostles to follow Him on the way of the Cross, a life shaped by self-giving and sacrifice. Something Bill Havens exhibited in staying with his wife back in 1924. In the Gospel it is striking that while Jesus was talking about what it means to lay down our lives for others, the apostles were arguing with one another about who was the greatest. They were fixated on worldly wisdom, ambition, while Jesus was calling them to centre their lives heavenly wisdom, what we might call abandonment.

Ambition or abandonment. It is this very theme that is highlighted in the reading from St. James. The ambitious life St James describes this way:

For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.¹ Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not

¹ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version](#). (1989). (Jas 3:16). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

come from your cravings that are at war within you? ² You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.²

Notice the dimensions of ambition St James highlights; envy, conflicts, disputes, cravings, covetousness and the like. All of these expressions of earthly wisdom were exhibited by the apostles and can be central to our lives. How much worldly wisdom is at play in homes and our larger society today? These cravings within us take on a diabolical expression in our first reading from the Book of Wisdom. Here is worldly wisdom completely dismissive of God and contemptuous of the godly person:

***Let us lie in wait for the righteous man,
because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions;³
Let us see if his words are true,
and let us test what will happen at the end of his life;
¹⁸ for if the righteous man is God's child, he will help him,
and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries.⁴***

The hypothetical person who is focused on abandonment to God and not the ambition of worldly wisdom is roundly mocked by the worldly man or woman. However the person growing in godliness is discovering to pray with today's psalm words of abandonment like these:

***But surely, God is my helper;
the Lord is the upholder of my life.⁵
With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you;
I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good.⁶***

Such a man or woman is also growing in desiring and exhibiting the character of a life marked by heavenly wisdom.

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Jas 4:1–2). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

³ [*The Holy Bible*](#). (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Wis 2:12). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Wis 2:17–18). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

⁵ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Ps 54:4). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

⁶ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Ps 54:6). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

What a different life from that of the self-absorbed ambitious person. To abandon ourselves so as to grow in embodying these virtues is something that has always been needed, but especially in these days where ambition and self-absorption seem so loud.

In the midst of so much cacophony we are invited to quietly contemplate how to live a life where we want to freely give ourselves to God and one another as we grow in heavenly virtue. The result of living with this heavenly wisdom is described by James this way:

¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. ⁷

What is a harvest of righteousness? A righteous life is one that is ordered from heaven, and in turn so influences how we live on earth. It is the kind of life that is characterized in the Lord's Prayer when we ask that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven, so that the kingdom of righteousness can be made visible in our lives.

There is a sequel to the story of Bill Havens. The child eventually born to Bill and his wife was a boy, whom they named Frank. Twenty-eight years later, in 1952, Bill received a cablegram from Frank. It was sent from Helsinki, Finland, where the 1952 Olympics were being held. The cablegram read: "Dad, I won. I'm bringing home the gold medal you lost while waiting for me to be born."

There is a sequel to our acts of commitment as well, our commitments to one another, and our commitment to God. In these sacrifices we make here in this life, we may...miss out. But, we shall receive a harvest of righteousness, a harvest of joy and peace that will endure forever. And we don't have to wait for heaven to experience it, when we learn the way of heavenly wisdom, the way of abandonment and choose now the wisdom from above that is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

⁷ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Jas 3:17–18). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.