

September 23

One line in today's Gospel has always amazed me. It is the sentence: "They had been discussing among themselves on the way who was the greatest." You remember the scene. Jesus and his disciples are on a journey through Galilee, and he was teaching them that he would have to be arrested and killed but he would arise after three days. At some point on the journey Jesus must have been out of hearing distance and missed the contents of an argument the disciples were having among themselves, because when they arrive at home in Capernaum, Jesus asks them: "What were you arguing about on the way? And then comes that amazing sentence: "They had been discussing among themselves who was the greatest."

Why do I find that sentence so amazing? Because grown-ups don't talk that way. Third-grade kids in a school yard may talk that way, but adults don't. And it is clear that in retrospect the disciples also realized that their arguing in this way was childish because the text tells us that when Jesus asked them about their argument, they remained silent. They were so ashamed that they said nothing. But that too is kind of childish. What do they hope? That if they say nothing, the whole thing is going to disappear? Third-grade actions again.

No, we adults don't argue about who is greatest. We leave that to third-graders. Nevertheless, we often live and act in such a way that it is clear that we are trying to be first, to be the richest, the most famous, the most praised, the most valued among our contemporaries. We may not say the words, but our actions betray us. Indeed, sometimes our actions do this in such a blatant way that they too, like the disciples' words, are childish. A friend told me recently that another friend told him that he now avoids a third friend, a mutual friend, because this friend talks about nothing except his wealth.

All of us look out for ourselves. Indeed, that is a given with our nature. Just as we remove our hand from something too hot, we remove ourselves, if it is all possible, from those who degrade us, who ignore us, who do not treat us respectfully. And that seems to be a reasonable way to behave, one which corresponds to a natural instinct for self-preservation, and one which as natural must be rooted in God Himself the author of our nature.

Nevertheless this good, this natural instinct for self-preservation on both the physical and psychological level can go astray when it results in thinking and actions which exalt us at the expense of others. In

short, we have to distinguish between our good sense of our own worth and selfishness.

But then, after we have secured a healthy sense of our self-worth, the Lord invites us to something greater. He asks us to begin to live unselfishly, to begin to put the needs of others before our own, to give way to the other, to take the last place at the table, and to do this not in the hope of then being honored by being called up higher by the host, but because this is the way we believe we should behave as a follower of Jesus. But how can we live in such an unnatural way? We can do so only because we see that Jesus has walked this way before us and because we believe him when he tells us that our true self, our true life, can be found only by living in this unselfish way: “The one who loses his or her life for my sake will find it,” Jesus promises us.

The early Christians understood that when they became Christians, they had to adopt this new way of living. Often in Paul’s Letters we find that some in the community were sliding back into old pagan ways of living, and Paul has to remind them that they cannot do that, that they must live as Jesus lived. We find this same theme in our second reading today from the Letter of St. James. He tells the recipients of this letter that it is their selfishness which brings about the conflicts and

wars among them. They have not yet learned to live as Jesus lived. They have not yet learned to serve others, as the Lord himself did.

Each of us must apply this message to our own lives? Are we still living in such a way as to make ourselves first? Have we even begun to imagine what living like Christ would be like for us, given the particular circumstances of our lives here and now? Have we, like the Lord, identified ourselves with the child, the little one, the helpless one? If not, we have miles to go before we can sleep, before we can reach home with the Lord and face his question: “What were you arguing about on the way?”