



OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

Homily

[*Wisdom 2:12, 17-20; Psalm 54; James 3:16-4:3; Mark 9:30-37*]

Once again, we find ourselves facing pandemic restrictions. Among the measures in place is the mandatory wearing of masks. In order for us to grasp the message contained for us in today's liturgy and its readings from Sacred Scripture, there is one aspect of mask-wearing upon which I would like to focus.

Masks muzzle speech. We don the mask to help prevent the spread of the virus, but doing so can make it difficult to hear what a person is saying. Words become muffled, and very often we hear something quite different from what the speaker intends to convey.

At this mass, our seminarian, Jake Mullen, will be formally instituted in the ministry of lector. It is a step in his journey toward possible ordination as a priest. By this liturgical act, Jake will be authorized to proclaim the Word of God at mass. This event serves also as a reminder of the call we each have, stemming from Baptism, to proclaim the Word of God in daily life by the words we speak and the way we live. The biblical passages we have heard pose this question: what are the "masks" that prevent us from speaking God's Word with clarity? The sacred texts warn us against three different types of masks that muzzle our capacity to communicate the Gospel clearly.

The first mask is pride. In the Gospel passage from St. Mark, Jesus speaks to his disciples of his impending suffering and death. Yet immediately afterward he finds his disciples arguing about who among them is the greatest. They are entirely self-preoccupied, concerned with their own glory and prestige, whereas Jesus calls them, and us, to let go of our desires and self-concern and instead humbly surrender to God's plan. The Gospel summons us to place our lives at the service of God and others, especially the forgotten and marginalized. When instead we prioritize our desires, the mask of pride muffles a clear proclamation of the Word of God.

Second is the mask of division. Jesus Christ gave his life so that all might become one in him. The clear communication of this message demands that his followers be united. This is why we hear St. James strongly criticize the early Christian community for conflicts and disputes that were dividing them. Division among Christians stifles our ability to announce the Gospel's call to unity and peace.

We need to be especially attentive to this particular mask at the present moment. There is deep division in society, as evidenced by competing reactions to the coronavirus and its prevention. The tensions have seeped into the Church, which means we need to be very careful not to hold on to approaches and attitudes that separate us from one another, and seek instead what will keep us united.

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Rather than adopt division, we have a call – urgent at the present moment – to counteract it by taking off that particular mask, so that our example of unity will speak clearly to our broader society.

Finally, is the mask of condemnation. The passage from *Wisdom* is a prophetic foreshadowing of the hostile and deadly reaction that Jesus would have to endure from his enemies. This sacred text brings to light a very disturbing tendency that has for a long time been gaining hold in our society. I am sure you have noticed it. When, for example, a person makes a mistake or says something contrary to prevailing opinion, the default reaction seems to be the wholesale destruction of the person's reputation or livelihood. Redemption is given no room. Clearly, this is contrary to the Gospel, which calls us to forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation. Here again we need to be on guard against this happening in the Church. When vengeance takes precedence over mercy, we put on a mask that smothers the announcement that, since God has shown mercy to all of us in the gift of His Son, we must show mercy to one another.

I expect that none of us is particularly happy that we have had to return to life within restrictions, including the wearing of a mask. Yet we put the medical mask on for the sake of the common good. Even more important for the well-being of everyone is the removal of those other types of masks that prevent the clear and joyful proclamation of the Gospel. Let us pray in this mass that, by the grace of the Eucharist, the Lord will remove all such masks by the gift of his mercy, so that his message of love and salvation will be clearly communicated by the witness of our lives.

Most Reverend Richard W. Smith
Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples
September 19th, 2021