

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Sept. 20)
Mark 9, 29-36 (Greek 9, 30-37) (*)

Politics

Politics in its good sense means the science and art of governing; it is the theory and practice of managing affairs of public policy or of political parties. In its bad sense, "politics" means more or less tricky manipulations to secure the success of political candidates or parties. This latter meaning has become so common, that any attempt to obtain a position not entirely out of one's merits but thru certain connections or manipulations, is called "politics" — whether this happens in the school, in one's club, or even in the family circle.

In the Gospel story today, we learn that the disciples once tried their ability to play "politics" in the wider and bad sense. The position they aspired after was that of being the greatest in their group. They even had a caucus about this.

What was the reaction of Christ? Our story tells us the answer very clearly. Christ frowned upon the disciples' "politics". He wanted his disciples to be disengaged from the quest for positions or prestige. He took the trouble to demonstrate to them that greatness in the kingdom of Heaven does not consist in positions or prestige, but in that simplicity by which we put our whole life in the hands of God.

Bad "politics" have done a lot of harm in human life. So many friendships have gone to the rocks because of this type of politics. So many people have lost faith in justice and fair play and human goodness.

* The numbering of verses is one number behind in the Vulgate (as also in the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine English Version) because what is counted in the Vulgate as the last verse of chapter 8 is counted in Greek editions as the first verse of chapter 9. The Jerusalem Bible and the RSV follow the latter numbering.

Even the Church has not been free of bad "politics." Certainly there are those in authority in the Church who obtained their positions because of "politics."

Fortunately, however, we also have people who, even while occupying positions of authority, are good through and through. Take the example of Pope John XXIII. When talking with newsmen after the opening of the Vatican Council, he complained that they tried to paint him as a "diplomatic Pope" or a "Political Pope". He said, "I've been reading about the Council and have found hardly two (newspaper) stories that were correct in their reporting. I've read of holy Popes, diplomatic Popes, political Popes, but really the Pope is only the Pope, a good shepherd who tries to defend truth and goodness." Once, he also said: "I'm not really a diplomat, or if I am one I am so only incidentally for I try to speak nothing but the truth. Perhaps it is this which leads people to credit me with diplomacy." As for being political, Pope John's politics is the only real one, namely, Charity. "When you are charitable," he said, "you are sure of never being mistaken. Learn how to understand, to forgive, to be gracious. That's Christianity. By contrast it is the way of the world to push, to parade, to use violence. That's all wrong. The force we possess is the truth and the charity of Jesus Christ."

At a time when bad "politics" is starting to have a stranglehold on human goodness, God raised up a man whose name was John. Here was a man who was simply and utterly good, so much so that people spontaneously called him "Good Pope John." Here was a man who did not play bad "politics". Here was a man who did not want to be the greatest but the least. And yet he is the greatest man of our times. Let us follow his example.