

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Feb 12th 2018

This reflection will be posted soon. In the meantime, this is a reflection by Dennis Hamm, S.J. from the archives for this day in 2008.

“What are you looking for?” On the surface level, that can be a pretty trivial question. On a deeper level, the question can be a profoundly serious one. I think the author of the Fourth Gospel meant us to take it in that deeper sense when he reported Jesus posing that question to the disciples of John the baptist in the first chapter of that book.

Today’s readings give us two contrasting sorts of seeking—the kind exercised by the Pharisees arguing with Jesus, and the contrasting kind of seeking that James advises his readers (us) to pursue. Mark speaks of the Pharisees arguing with Jesus, “seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him.” And this, mind you, comes right after Jesus had presided over a miraculous feeding of four thousand persons with seven loaves and a few fish. And it was Pharisees who were present at the healing of the man with the withered hand in the synagogue of Capernaum. They had seen signs aplenty. So Jesus’ response to their request for “a sign from heaven” is understandable: He sighed from the depth of his spirit and said, “Why does this generation seek a sign? Amen I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.” There will of course be further signs—more healing, and the ultimate signs of crucifixion and resurrection, but not the kind of special-effects “sign from heaven” that they were demanding.

It is quite another kind of seeking the James invites us to, in the beginning of his encyclical (a circular letter addressed “to the twelve tribes in the dispersion,” i.e. all the scattered Christians of his day). If any of you lacks wisdom [i.e. the kind that sustains the Christian in troubled times, as indicated by the context], he should ask God who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and he will be given it. But he should ask in faith, not doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed about by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord, since he is a man of two minds [aner dipsychos], instable in all his ways (James 1:5-8).

What comes through this comparison of kinds of seeking? The Pharisees were not seeking truth. They were seeking to get their way with him. They had already determined to have Jesus killed (see Mark 3:6). Their demand for a sign from heaven followed upon their rejection of the earthly signs (healing and feeding) that he had already provided. Whereas the seeking James advises is the God-given wisdom needed to persevere in troubled times. What’s more, it is a trusting and persistent seeking, which James contrasts with being “of two minds”—dipsychos—that is, not really seeking in a committed way, from the heart.

To end where we began, when those disciples of John heard Jesus ask, “What are you looking for?” they answered, “Where do you live? (clearly, not a question about his residential address).” And he said, “Come and see.” That invitation leads in the opposite direction of the Pharisees’ seeking—getting one’s way. Seeing “where Jesus lives” leads to seeking the will of the One who sent him. About that, we are called to be single-minded in our seeking. James, like Jesus, promises that we will get what we ask for.

