

Over the years my wife & I have had the enjoyable, challenging experience of going on a number of eight day wilderness canoe trips on the Steel River route in Northern Ontario. Before setting out on the trip each time we equip ourselves with, among other things needed, topographical map & compass. Together, the map and compass hold a clean, accurate promise of what's to come. But then there is actual trip itself, which is something else – messy, tiring, sweaty, unpredictable, full of surprises. And along way the one needs to make an unending series of intelligent decisions– decisions about reading white water to avoid submerged rocks, decisions about personal safety: how tired am I? Should we stop here for the night or press on to a better campsite? Shoot this set, or better to portage? And so on. And sure enough, sometimes we make wrong decisions.

Today's gospel gives us a moral compass. 'No one can serve two masters,' says Jesus in Matthew [6:24] – we need to choose. One choice is wealth: short form for self interest in any form – money, pleasure, convenience, reputation. The other choice is to serve God: 'Seek first God's kingdom & his righteousness.' Put God first; love God with all our heart That means love truth & justice & kindness above all else. It means letting nothing keep us from the truth, however distasteful that may be, and letting nothing keep us from absolute justice, total fairness in our decisions & actions. It means the single-mindedness of prophet Micah's challenge: 'What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God?'

If we make the choice to serve God, what can we expect?

First, peace of mind. At what the poet Yeats called the 'deep heart's core,' that still point at the very existential center of our being, we need not be anxious about anything at all. Jesus tells his audience that they need not worry about what to eat & drink & wear – and these were folk who had good reason to worry about poverty! Instead, we are to live in trust that God's love is unfailingly with us, and not to worry.

This theme of God's peace given to us is echoed in Isaiah: "I will not forget you....." And in the Psalmist: 'like a child that is quieted is my soul.' Most notably, this profound peace of mind is evident in Paul, too: 'We are servants of Christ – it doesn't matter to me whether you or anyone else judges me – I don't even judge myself.' Here Paul is remarkably mellow, laid back, at peace with himself. His moral compass has brought him, at this time at least, a profound sense of confidence.

With God at the center, all the other concerns, loyalties and loves of our lives fall into a gestalt: family, friends, professional group, country. And we experience a kind of liberation, an energy freed up because our lives are going in one true direction, not scattering off in all directions.

So in today's gospel we are invited to experience this deep calm, this liberating power that comes when we really make God the center of our lives, when we value truth, justice, compassion more than our own comfort & convenience.

All this is true. But it is only half the picture.

So what can we expect – beside this inner peace of mind & confidence – when we use this

compass? Maybe here we should listen to Jesus' words of warning later in Matthew: 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a man's foes will be those of his own household....' [10.34] In other words, when we serve God, we can expect conflict. It's like the difference between the map and compass – complete clarity – on the one hand, and the messy business of actually making the trip – work, fatigue, uncertainties, at times bad judgments, misreading the map, and so on, on the other.

Two reflections, then, on our moral decision making in the real world – on actually living out a life of serving God:

First, we often get it right: we face a challenge in our church or family or business – and our big decision is wise, and leads to the good results we envisaged. But sometimes – even when we are really trying for truth, kindness, justice, we get it wrong.

Why is this so? Sometimes we misunderstand the situation. One example of this: a credible acquaintance of mine recently told a story of meeting a friend of his who had worked in the U.S. foreign aid & development sector in the 60's. His friend commented, 'You know, Ken, I feel really ashamed of what we did back then in African development. We meant well, we thought our decisions and the billions of dollars we spent would really help the African people. But we hadn't done our homework. We just didn't understand the situation. And those people are worse off now than if we had left them alone.'

Another example of things going wrong is closer to home for me. You may recall Bob Rae's 'Rae Days' in 1993: the Ontario NDP government of the day, in an attempt to get expenditures under control, asked public sector workers, including teachers, to accept 12 days unpaid leave. As a secondary school teacher and member of O.S.S.T.F. at the time, I joined many others in rejecting this initiative. Looking back on it now, I am not proud of our actions. I'm inclined to think that we got it wrong: that perhaps the acceptance of a modest sacrifice could have helped the situation and contributed to the common good.

So we make mistakes. On the positive side, though, we have marvelous resources for our moral journey through life: family, friends, discussion groups. We also have voices of wisdom, prophetic voices that can help us see complex situations wisely. When Romeo Dallaire speaks on Africa, for example, I listen. And there are church groups with breadth of vision, experience & wisdom. Kairos, for example, is deeply concerned & informed about justice issues. Not least of all, there's honest conversation, honest effort to see the truth of the matter, to make good decisions.

So today's gospel message for us is to put first things first, to put God's dream – justice & truth & kindness – before our own convenience & comfort. If we do so, we may expect conflict & we will not always make the best decisions, but we may also expect a deep inner peace & confidence. 'No one can serve two masters.' The decision is ours.