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Reflection – 2/23/22
Mk. 9: 38-40

Last week, we were holding our breath as athletes from around the world soared into the air and through the snow, performing feats which seemed impossible. We celebrated the skill and determination of Americans, Chinese, Italians, and Russians. Why is it that now we hold our breath, praying there will not be an armed invasion of one of these countries by another? Could it be different?

Today, the Church offers us an example of holiness from an entirely different time and place. St. Polycarp of Smyrna was martyred in the year 156. (I don't recall that we have ever had a Sister Polycarp.) Polycarp, we are told, was a disciple of the apostle John. He provides the Church of today a special link with the earliest circle of Jesus' followers, Jesus to John to Polycarp.

Of course, the readings of the day are not selected with reference to Polycarp. Rather, the Gospel from Mark, provides a vignette of Jesus instructing the apostle John, who later taught Polycarp. We know those stories now, but this was all new to John. It seemed to him that the right thing to do was protect Jesus. He thinks he should prevent others from healing in the name of Jesus, because they were not part of the group of Jesus' followers, known to John. John was devoted to Jesus. We can follow his logic, but today we recognize that it was narrow. Typically, Jesus stretches the Apostle's understanding, and ours, beyond what is known and seems right.

Jesus, who is not so easily put on the defensive as we may be, offers a logical explanation. If someone does a wonderful deed in His name, that same person is not likely to speak evil of him.

It is in this text that we find the Gospel's famous "cup of cold water". This is Jesus' assurance that it does not take momentous deeds to receive a reward. Anyone who gives you a drink of water "because you belong to Christ" will not lose their reward.

Stop and think. In the last 24 hours, have you received a "cup of cold water" (a cup of hot coffee) or perhaps, provided one? Perhaps it was a door held open, a message delivered, a friendly greeting, a question of concern, a smile. John was making a particular point when he said such things are done "because you belong to Christ". We have grown in seeing ourselves and others as belonging to Christ and to each other...not in a pietistic way, but in the theological reality of our life in Christ.

This does not require of us the strength and skill of the athletes at the Olympics; we will be given the strength and grace we need. Let's watch for the opportunity to offer (or receive) a cup of cold water...or hot coffee...today.