

Puff of Smoke Seventh Week in Ordinary Time Wednesday, February 26, 2014 8:15 AM
Jas 4:13-17; Mk 9:38-40 (Our life and decisions are opportunities that will find their greatest fulfillment when they jive with the will of God.)

“You are a puff of smoke that appears briefly and then disappears.”

This is from the Letter of St. James and, as I mentioned before, this is incorporating this perennial wisdom, this philosophy of humanity, that finds its way into all cultures. **It is a meditation on the transitory nature of life.** “You are a puff of smoke,” sometimes translated “a vapor that appears briefly and then disappears.” This is the central meditation of the philosophy or wisdom teaching of Buddhism. It’s all about the transitory nature of life. **We know in our minds that we are all going to die.** We see that nothing lives forever; even sequoia trees eventually die. So we know that. It’s a fact, but **it is not a fact that we allow to touch us very deeply.** We put it on the border of our awareness, or even push it into the shadow so that it doesn’t bother us. But in not bothering us it also doesn’t inform us. It doesn’t advise us. It doesn’t counsel us, but it could; it could help us to realize the transitory nature of our lives. **It could help us make really sound decisions.**

In recent years, by “recent” I mean going back to World War I, this insight concerning the transitory nature of life also became part of a philosophy, a modern philosophy, called **“existentialism.”** But that **is marked by a decidedly negative, pessimistic, anxiety-ridden discontentment, as opposed to Buddhism and traditional wisdom** that uses this insight to become more at peace, more content, with whatever, with one’s situation, one’s lot in life. For existentialism, no, and this unfortunately is a mark of much modern thinking. It’s acknowledging this truth, but then interpreting it in a very negative, dark, almost rebellious way. And this is one of the **early seedbeds of atheism in the twentieth century.** How could a good God have created this life that passes away, that is so ephemeral? So we see already a lack of faith in the early days

of the twentieth century that would even feed into this sort of negative view because **this fact could be interpreted either way: positively**—well, what a blessing we are here for a while; we are able to do something, make some contribution and then go on to something better—a wholesome, optimistic, hope-filled way of looking at life, avoiding the pitfalls of wanting too much right now or wanting the wrong thing right now. But then there is **this other way** of possibly looking at it: to say, well, isn't this awful, **what a miserable, horrible existence we are living in**. So we are **presented with the facts of life, and then we are asked to make a choice about how we are going to deal with them**.

St. James' point is that actually everything depends upon the will of God. And we might have our ideas of what we should be doing, but let's consult God; let's ask God to help us make our decision about where we will be today and tomorrow and next year, and what we will be doing. Let's not think that this short period of life is just for our own pleasure or for our arbitrary decisions. **Let's think of them as opportunities that will find their greatest fulfillment when they jive with the will of God.**