

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4 / Luke 17:5-10)
02.10.2022
Servant

Jesus' last words in today's Gospel passage are difficult to translate from the Greek. Biblical scholars disagree among themselves about their exact meaning: "We are merely servants: we have done no more than our duty."

The first point, which is clear for everybody, is that we are all servants. In the Church, we are all servants of God and servants of each other. There are obviously as many forms of service as there are servants and yet we are all equal in dignity in God's household.

Let us be clear about the fact that in our Christian communities, there are not those who serve and those who are served. We are all called to minister to one another according to our calling and skills. The parable of the talents (cf. Mt 24:14-30) teaches us that we cannot be lazy or passive in regards to our skills. We cannot be sterile and so we have something to accomplish. There is a job to be done. God's gifts are given so that they may be generously shared. They will grow insofar as they are sown and tended to.

Jesus' insistence on the fact that we are servants is not rooted in a sadistic desire to keep us in servitude, in a kind of humiliating status of slavery. On the contrary Jesus is moved by the desire to free us from being too concerned about the work we are called to accomplish. We are not masters of the harvest. God is in charge. While we have a job to do, it is important for us to remember that both the work itself and the result arrived at do not belong to us. We do what we can, we do it the best we can and then we have to leave the rest to God who knows what is best for us and for the world. It would be good if we could imitate St John XXIII who, every evening, after having read some prayers, used to conclude by saying: "It's your church Lord. I'm going to bed." At the end of the day, God is the one who holds all things together (cf. Col 1:17).

In our communities we have to beware of those who are happy to settle in a kind of complacent inertia and of those who wish to control everything.

Both groups are lacking in love, love which is about giving and receiving, about bearing much fruit for the good of all.

Jesus' particularly difficult word in his statement is the one translated by *merely*: "We are merely servants." The sense of the Greek word *achreios* is disputed, literally it means "useless, worthless" but all the translators think that this meaning does not apply to our text. So what does Jesus mean?

It seems that the meaning of the adjective becomes clearer when we read the end of the sentence: "we have done no more than our duty." Jesus wants to emphasise the fact that there is no room for human boasting in our service. A rabbi from the 1st century before Christ said: "If you have achieved much in the Law, claim no merit for yourself; for this purpose were you created." (Rabbi Yohanan b. Zakkai, *m. Abot* 2:8)

It is clear that for Jesus we must have a proper sense of self-worth and self-love. Christ's mission is to restore us to our dignity as children of God, co-heirs with him. Yet we must constantly be reminded that we can never hold God in our debt. Here the parable of the labourers in the vineyard is particularly relevant (cf. Mt 20:1-16). The last comers receive as much as the first. God gives freely and generously to all and its gift does not depend on our achievements but on our openness to his grace which has made us faithful and perseverant in faith, hope and love.

If, as St Benedict writes: “Service fosters love” (RB 35:2), then service is not an option for us because ultimately, our deepest longing is to love and to be loved. We have to learn over and over again that our fidelity to accomplish our service is the highest expression of our love for God and for others.

The challenge for us is not so much to do great things but to do simply the will of the Father.

Where we are in life, we can serve our brothers and sisters, be servants of the life-giving and liberating word (cf. Lk 1:2) we hear proclaimed in the Scriptures.

What we are able to do can be very small and discreet, yet we all have received the Spirit of power and love (cf. 2Tm 1:7) and this Spirit is within us like a spring which longs to flow out to those who are around us and to the whole world.

In the Synthesis of the Consultation in Ireland for the Diocesan Stage of the Universal Synod, we read that: “Adult faith development, resources for lay ministries and collaborative decision-making was flagged as poor or non-existent. Clergy acknowledged that in many contexts they are too tired and weary to engage in these developments.” (p. 7)

The authors of the synthesis mention also a “perceived passivity of the parish community or wider Church when it comes to lay ministry.” (p. 9) In this situation, we are told that some priests feel “edged out with diminishing power and relevancy.” (p. 8)

It is in this context that the synthesis speaks of the need for “a model of servant-leadership.” (p. 7) It is the only time that the word *servant* is used in the 29 pages synthesis. That is such a pity because it seems to me that the concept of service is certainly one which can help us not to fall in the trap of a struggle for power between lay people and clergy in the Church. That priests feel that their power is diminishing is not a bad thing if it makes them grow as servants. But in fact all of us lay people, clergy, consecrated men and women, are called to be servants in a servant Church.

Pope Francis believes that “service is the measure of greatness in the Church.” (*Meditation*, 25.02.2020) Our greatness does not depend on our power or relevancy but on our dedication to serve truly and wholeheartedly.

With “the power at work within us which is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Eph 3:20), let us commit ourselves to serve one another in love and respect, bringing down the walls of discrimination, freeing one another with the gift of forgiveness and hope, and building together a more just and peaceful society.