

29th Sunday of the Year (B)
(Isaiah 53:10-11 / Mark 10:35-45)
27.10.2024
Service as Mission

While Christianity has sometimes been criticised for holding people down and keeping them in a kind of spiritual immaturity, while it may have been used to maintain sinful social structures, today, in our Gospel reading, Jesus is quite clear on the fact that he has no problem with us being great or the first.

What he challenges is not our desire to be great or the first, but what kind of greatness we are aiming at and what means we intend to use in order to be great.

St Paul invited the Corinthians to “strive for the greater gifts” (1 Co 12:31) and the Ephesians to grow to “the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:13)... nothing less than that!

Christ does not want us to be self-loathing and constantly marinating in an atmosphere of humiliation. St John Henry Newman believed that “gloom is no Christian temper.” (*Serm.* 19)

Our faith journey consists in striving to live up to our restored dignity in Christ, and in becoming who we truly are, in joy and peace. The challenge is to recognise that we cannot do this on our own. We need to imitate Christ and to serve the Lord and one another, to serve the Lord in one another.

For us, service is not optional, it defines us as followers of Christ. It is the way of life which allows us to become great, not in the eyes of a society which is obsessed with achievements and self-reliance but in the eyes of God who wants us to be fully alive, in communion with him and with one another. To serve is our way to be conformed to the “holy Servant Jesus”, the anointed one (4:27), as we read in the Acts of the Apostles.

There are two characteristics which mark Jesus’ service: first, it is respectful. Jesus neither coerces anybody nor imposes anything. His service is not part of a commercial transaction. He does not give in order to receive, he gives because giving is what love is about.

Jesus’ respect is clearly revealed in the way he deals with the two disciples. He begins by asking them: “What is it you want me to do for you?” Too often, we go to people with the best of intentions but we approach them assuming that we know what they need and failing to allow them to express their longing and desires. We fail to listen to their questions because we think we know the answers they are looking for. Respect begins with listening to the people we meet and asking them humbly what they want, what the questions that they carry in their hearts and minds really are.

Second, Jesus’ service is generous. There is nothing stingy in the way Jesus interacts with us. For Jesus the best way to serve is to give oneself totally “as a ransom for many.” And here we have to remember that he did this “while we were still sinners.” (Rm 5:8) so it is clear that his generosity, like his love, knows no bounds (cf. Hos 14:4).

A week ago, Pope Francis wrote a letter to the new cardinals-elect. In it we read: “I assure you of my prayers that the title of ‘servant’ will increasingly eclipse that of ‘eminence’.” (06.10.2024)

I suppose that none of us will ever receive the title ‘Eminence’ but it seems to me that we all should reclaim and embody more fully the title of ‘Servant’. It is not only cardinals

who need to be reminded of the primacy of service in the “servant Church of Jesus Christ” (St John Paul II, *Message*, 29.01.1980).

On this Mission Sunday, it is appropriate to remember that we are all missionaries and that our core mission is to serve one another. This mission begins in our families and communities, but it has to go beyond the small boundaries of our familiar circles towards those who are on the margins and the peripheries of our society. There, we will find many men and women who do not know where to go for healing and who are tempted to quench their thirst at the wrong tap.

With respect and generosity, the service that we are called to provide to others, all others, is to show them – by the witness of our lives more than by our words, – the paths that lead to Christ the physician (cf. Mk 2:17) and to the fountain of the Word of God, the Sacraments and the fellowship of a welcoming Christian community.

In our Gospel reading when Jesus asks the two disciples: “What is it you want me to do for you?” he sets the tone as to how we should serve others, how we should be missionaries.

The last point which needs to be stressed is that we are not solitary servants, ministering to others on our own. St Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, and St John, in the book of Revelation, are keen to use the expression “fellow-servant” (Col 1:7; 4:7; Rev 6:11; 19:10; 22:9). It highlights the fact that, in the Church, we are always missionary servants as part of a community of servants.

Since we have all been given different talents and skills, we will serve one another in personal and particular ways, while doing so together, for the common good. We are all fellow-servants in the one Body of Christ.

In his Rule, St Benedict reminds the monks that “service fosters love” (RB 35:2). The self-giving of oneself in the smallest actions, the humble service rendered without calculation and any hidden agenda, the discreet sacrifice of one’s time or plans in order to be available to somebody who is in need, all these attitudes foster love, communion and life. They are the distinctive marks of our discipleship and the means which will help us to become great in the image of “our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).