

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time B/2015

The readings of this Sunday talk about the importance of serving. They show that to serve others rather than oneself is the greatest honor that someone can have. They invite us to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of our fellows.

The first reading describes the prophecy of Isaiah about the sufferings of the servant of the Lord. It highlights in particular the fact that his sufferings were part of God's plan. It also shows that through his sufferings, many will be saved, as well as he will himself be rewarded by God.

What is behind this text is the idea that salvation comes out of suffering. Another idea is the truth that by willingly accepting to suffer and sacrifice his own life, the servant of God becomes a source of salvation for others.

This text helps us understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus invites his disciples to show their greatness through the service of others than otherwise. First of all, the Gospel says that James and John, two of Jesus' disciples, wanted that he give them a privileged position in his kingdom.

Then, it gives the response of Jesus who asked them of their capacity to endure the sufferings he had to go through. As they answered positively, Jesus told them that it was not up to him to make it happen, but rather his Father.

After that, the Gospel gives the indignant reaction of the other apostles who were unhappy by the request of their colleagues. The Gospel ends up with Jesus' declaration attesting that unlike the great of this world who let their authority felt on their subjects, they should be different. In consequence, the Gospel says that, at the example of Jesus himself who gave his life for many, whoever wanted to be great should be the servant of others and whoever wanted to be first, should be the slave of all.

What do we learn from this text? Today I want to talk about greatness in the Lord. But, in order to understand the point I want to make, it is better that we refer to human experience.

In fact, in our daily life, when we say of someone that he is great, we look at an ensemble of activities or things in which that person has been involved and in which he has given the full measure of himself beyond anybody else and the ordinary people. In that sense, greatness has to do with accomplishments that make someone successful and different from the average people.

Greatness is also associated with fame and power, wealth and prestige, status and position. In such context, what counts most is the skills displayed, the abilities to handle things and the lasting influence. People in such a position are easily counted as successful in their undertakings and have servants at their service.

In Jesus' vision, greatness has nothing to do with status or position, but rather with the way of serving others. The more people serve others without pursuing personal interests and give the best of themselves for the sake of others, the more they are great.

That is what Jesus tries to explain to his disciples. Therefore, the request of the brothers Zebedee is something done according to human standard where greatness has to do with status that places someone above others. So, even if the two brothers can accept sufferings for the sake of the kingdom, only God the Father can make someone great in his kingdom

after he has been judged worthy of him through his conduct on earth. And the criterion of judgment here is service to others and not pursuit of honor.

In that sense, greatness comes out of the opportunity to serve others and to do good and not otherwise. By saying that, Jesus is not demonizing the human desire for grandeur or greatness. What he wants is that our desire for greatness, as legitimate as it might be, might be seen in the way we strive to do good to those under our direction, rather than in just focusing on our personal interests. That is why in Jesus' conception, grandeur has to do more with renunciation of power and the aspiration to serve others.

But, why shall we behave that way? Well, we have to do so in imitation of Jesus our master who spent his life on earth in serving and not in looking for his own interest. If we cannot act like him in our relationship with one another, it will be difficult for us to be his true disciples.

That is why Jesus' vision, as presented, challenges us seriously with regard to the way we exercise our leadership on a daily basis and assume our various roles in society. A true leader is the one who sacrifices in order to make others happy, and not the one who makes others feel his authority. A great leader is not the one who lets people serve him, because he is in a position of authority, but the one who serves them. A leader does not use privilege at all cost and use his authority in order to bend people to his will, but the one who knows how to respect others in their position so that they obey willingly and not by coercion.

By saying this, I do not mean that in order to be a good leader, we have to be easy or soft on those under our authority. The problem is all about the way we exercise that authority, whether it becomes a burden on others or a way of helping them so that they come to the fulfillment of their aspiration. In this process, it is also important to avoid imposing on others what we do not like ourselves. Otherwise, it would be a double standard in the exercise of our authority. Let us pray, then, that the Lord may help us to search for greatness through the service of our brothers and sisters. Let us ask him to help us desire above all what is beneficial to our fellows, rather than to focus on our own interests. God bless you all!

Isaiah 53: 10-11; Hebrews 4: 14-16; Mark 10: 35-45



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