

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time B2021

The readings of this Sunday talk about the importance of service. 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 God. 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 and he will 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 the point of today's Gospel as Jesus invites his disciples to show their greatness through the service of others rather than themselves. First of all, the Gospel says that James and John, two of Jesus' disciples, wanted that he gives them a privileged position in his kingdom.

Then, it gives Jesus' response as he 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 to 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 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 the power of serving. In today's Gospel the two Zebedee's brothers, James and John, make a request to Jesus to allow them sit in his kingdom one at his right, another at his left.

To sit at the right or the left of someone means to be in position of command as main men on whom he can count. In fact, in the understanding of the disciples, by undertaking a trip to Jerusalem, Jesus was about to establish his kingdom. He would triumph over all the enemies of Israel and give back its autonomy to the country. In that context, there would be a chance for them to be the men on who Jesus could count.

Unfortunately, their vision was just human, led by the desire to be the greatest among their peers. That is the reason why the other apostles got indignant with the two brothers for what they requested. In truth, Jesus was going to Jerusalem in order to die and fulfill the mission the Father gave him.

The two brothers' request, in fact, highlights the problem with most of our prayers. Like them, we want Jesus to do whatever we ask. And yet, true prayer should always be that God's will might be fulfilled on earth as it is in heaven, so that we submit our desires to his will. If we want to resemble Jesus, we have to imitate him in his humility and smallness.

That is why for Jesus, greatness is not in search for status or position, but rather in 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. It is all about power in

serving rather than power in commanding. In that perspective, Zebedee brothers' request is done according to human standard where greatness has to do with status and positions than with serving others.

Thus, even if they would accept sufferings for the sake of the kingdom, this still would not mean that Jesus would grant them their request for great honor. Suffering is the price of greatness, but it is the price required to follow Christ at all. They would follow and they would suffer, but they would not thereby sit at his right or left in the kingdom. Only God the Father can make someone great in his kingdom after he judges him worthy of him. The criterion of judgment is service to others and not the pursuit of honor and human grandeur.

In that sense, greatness comes out of the opportunity to serve and do good to others. By saying that, Jesus is not demonizing the human desire for grandeur or greatness. What he wants is that our desire for greatness might be seen in the way we strive to do good to others rather than in just focusing on our personal interests. In Jesus' conception too, grandeur has to do more with the aspiration to serve others and less with the desire to have authority.

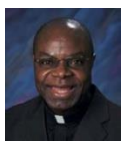
This demand of Jesus is challenging because in each one of us there is an innate desire to dominate and have ascendance over others. But, it is also here that we are called to show that the Gospel has transformed us, that we are not only living according to our human nature, but by grace. The work of grace in us has transformed us into servants of others. The model to follow here is not the world, but Jesus himself. He spent his life on earth in serving until death on the cross. If we cannot act like him, we will hardly be his true disciples.

Today Jesus challenges us seriously with regard to the way we exercise our leadership and assume our various roles in society. A true leader is the one who sacrifices his life 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 true leader does not use his authority in order to force people bend to his will, but the one who respects 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 grow and fulfill their deepest aspirations.

Let us pray, then, that the Lord may help us to search for greatness through the service to 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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