

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Isaiah 53:10-11 / Mark 10:35-45)
17.10.2021
Servant Leadership

Dear brothers and sisters,

It happens that we dream of being the greatest or taking the lead. There is nothing wrong with that. It all depends upon the way we proceed.

It happens that we dream of occupying the first place, of taking centre stage, winning acclaim and receiving a standing ovation after a performance or whatever it may be. This is to see things from a human perspective. While our hopes of being recognized are legitimate, they are often disappointing. Many of those who are used to receiving standing ovations after a speech, a lecture or a concert, once they return home, experience a deep depression. The standing ovation is quickly forgotten, and they are confronted once again with their finitude, their desire for more, that is to say their desire for God. Our desire for God can be fulfilled only by the Lord himself and not by being at the centre of everything and forever winning acclaim.

It also happens that we dream of being in charge, of being in control, of seeing things done our way by all around us. Perhaps this works for a time. But one day or another, we become very disappointed because it no longer works. We find that we are no longer in control and life goes on without us.

All this can be our way of being, but it is not the Lord's way; it is not the way of the kingdom. There is no fully satisfying or lasting happiness to be found in following our way alone. Fulfilment and happiness are found only with God.

In today's gospel, Jesus invites us to think differently about greatness and about leadership. For Jesus, the greatest among us is the one who serves. For Jesus, a leader is a servant. Leadership is not just about me, and my personal fulfilment; it is about the common good. A leader, in Jesus' perspective, is someone who helps others so that all may arrive together towards a good end with a common goal.

In order to become a servant leader, Jesus tells us that we have to renounce the desire to be treated by others with flattering deference; He insists that we have to renounce getting our own way simply because we hold the power; we have also to renounce seeing ourselves as important people who can ignore others and judge them as insignificant. In the Lord's perspective, in the Lord's kingdom, nobody is insignificant. It does not belong to us to label someone as insignificant. We were all created in the image and likeness of God.

To become a servant leader, Jesus invites us to choose a life of service, to choose to humbly take care of the needs of others, to choose to influence others so that we may achieve together shared goals.

If we want to know what Jesus means by servant leadership, the best way is to observe Him closely and then imitate Him, knowing that Jesus ended his life here on earth by his passion and death on the cross. Following Jesus implies having a share in his passion and death. There is no other way, no other roadmap to arrive at true greatness. Jesus personified servant leadership perfectly. He did not try just to enrich himself, he did not grasp at or cling to honours and status; Jesus did not use intrigue to get himself into a position of power. He set aside his own needs to minister to the needs of others.

Jesus had a clear sense of his mission which was to invite and empower others to work for the coming of God's kingdom. How important it is for us to remain faithful to the mission we have received from God! We pray everyday and even several times a day: "Lord, may your kingdom come"! Our mission is to work for the coming of the Lord's kingdom. Our leadership is to help others to unite their efforts in order to facilitate the coming of God's kingdom in our midst. This is not always straightforward. There is often a price to pay which includes meeting with opposition, suffering and giving our life.

Jesus took time to be alone with God, in order to pray and recharge his spiritual energy. This was his way of allowing the Father to transform Him day after day.

When his followers needed to reflect and to reset their priorities, Jesus was not afraid to challenge them and redirect their focus. We have all in mind the example of Peter whom Jesus rebuked: "Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my path, because you are thinking not as God thinks but as human beings do..." (Mt 16:3).

When we think about leadership, about servant leadership, the temptation of us is to think about politicians and public leaders and to point to their self-serving and power grabbing ways. But this was not Jesus concern. Jesus did not criticise leadership in itself. What he did was to put us on our guard about how leadership is exercised. He pointed to leaders who were lording it over others and then said: "This is not to happen among you". The truth is that most of us have to exercise some kind of leadership. If we are in a position to help others achieve common goals in family, in community, at work, in the parish, at school, on the sport field, among a group of friends, then we have an opportunity to exercise servant leadership.

Servant leadership is the way to happiness, to lasting and not disappointing happiness. Happiness is what the Lord calls us to enjoy. The way leading to it is not always what we think. To be great or to lead is not about myself and my own personal realisation, my own personal gratification. It is about serving, serving the Other par excellence, the Lord, and serving others, all others as Christ did – out of love!