

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time – October 17th 2021
A Reflection by Fr Sylvester O’Flynn OFM Cap., Rochestown, Cork

Christ the Servant

For the past few weeks, the Sunday readings from Mark’s Gospel set us on the road, following Jesus on the way towards his death and resurrection in Jerusalem. The Gospel each week is a challenge asking us are we true followers or not. Last week, you might remember, a rich young man was invited to share his wealth with the poor. He turned away with a very sad face.

Today’s Gospel (Mark 10:35-45) is about the wrong ambitions still nurtured by the apostles. What Jesus had been saying to them had not sunk in one iota. They seem to remember nothing of the outcome of the earlier argument regarding which of them was the greatest. Jesus set a little helpless child before them. Christian greatness would be shown in helping others rather than dominating them.

The brothers, James and John, came looking for a favour. They had seen many people come to him for favours and getting what they asked. But there was something horribly selfish in their request. They often heard Jesus talk about God’s kingdom. Thoughts of earthly power and prestige grew in their minds. The favour they wanted was nothing less than the two highest places in this kingdom. Jesus took their request in the most compassionate way possible and gave them the benefit of ignorance. “You do not know what you are asking.”

The ten other apostles were no better. They were not one bit pleased that the brothers were trying to steal a march on them.

Jesus came to serve

It was time for Jesus to call them around. He outlined his ideal of leadership and authority. “Among the pagans their so-called rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. No, anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be the first among you must be slave to all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Where do we stand today?

The word of God in the sacred scripture is a light like an X-ray penetrating the secret thoughts of the mind and emotions of the heart. Like the apostles, do we as individuals need to learn that true followers of Jesus are those who serve? Is it a challenge to the Church as a whole?

Francis and the gospel

When Pope Francis chose the name of the poor man of Assisi it was a statement of his understanding of the role of the Church. The first line of every Franciscan rule is about the observance of the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ. His idea of tradition was not about retaining the centuries when bishops lived in palaces, cardinals were princes and holy Mother Church had to answer to nobody when scandals were covered up. His predecessor, Pope Benedict, was asked about power and authority in the Church. He explained that authority is linked to author, and authority in the Church is not about power but it means the responsibility of fidelity to our author, Jesus Christ. To be fully traditional means going back to the life of Jesus and the early Church as revealed in the Acts of the Apostles and letters of Saint Paul.

Going back to the gospel

Going back to the gospel is very comforting but also very challenging. Last Sunday’s Gospel was the story of the rich young man who was challenged by Jesus to sell his property and give to the poor. He rejected the Lord’s challenge, his face fell and he turned his back. Jesus then

said it is very hard for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God, that is, to take to heart the ideals of true Christianity. It comes as no surprise that many who have stored up great wealth are not too happy with Pope Francis and his idea of a Church of the poor and for the poor. It is very sad that they are pumping obscene amounts of money into television, radio and newspaper media which are openly hostile to Pope Francis. One agency received the equivalent of half a billion Euro for a single year. Serious stuff. That money could have provided food and medical care for millions. How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the mind of Jesus.

Archaeological excavations near the ancient temple in Jerusalem have revealed that the temple people lived in the lap of luxury. The teaching of Jesus and his symbolic act of clearing the money-changers and tax collectors out of the temple convinced the supposedly religious people that Jesus would put them out of business. It was they who concocted the various schemes which put Jesus on the cross.

How you serve the least of my people

If I may be flippant for a moment, when I read the gospel, I see that Jesus is getting more like Pope Francis every day! Of course, it is the other way around. Francis is bringing us back to be followers of the One who came, not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. He simplified the last judgement to one question: what did you do or what did you neglect to do to the least of my beloved people? His mother, Mary, described herself as the handmaid or servant of the Lord.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, gentle and humble of heart, you came to show us how to serve one another. You stripped yourself of divine glory when you came in the poverty of a human body. You came to serve and to give your life as a ransom for many. You did the slave's job when you washed the feet of the disciples. Open up our minds and hearts to follow in your footsteps. May we live as people here to serve.