

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Isaiah 53:10-11

Ps 32

Hebrews 4:14-16

Mark 10:35-45

Well, in our Gospel today, the brothers James and John—God bless ‘em—give us a perfect example of how *not* to engage with Jesus!

Motivated by personal ambition, they come off sounding presumptuous and arrogant. “Allow us to sit one at your right hand and the other at your left in your glory.” It would be like a high-schooler going to the school principal on day one and asking to be made Student President. The other disciples were upset – but only because they wanted this glory for themselves!

Poor Jesus! He must have thought, “How much longer do I need to put up with you guys until you get it?!” Indeed, he said almost this exact thing a little later on.

The brothers’ effort to be honoured by Jesus shows just how badly they misunderstood his mission. They thought that their journey to Jerusalem was about reclaiming the capital from foreign oppression, and crowning Jesus as king of the Jews. They thought they had joined Jesus’ victory march, and they wanted in on the gravy train.

Little did they know, that Jesus’ image of glory was rather different from what they imagined. James and John wanted to share in Christ’s glory? Well be careful what you wish for – because it turns out that Christ’s supreme moment of glory... was THAT! (*point to crucifix*). Those granted places at his right and left... turned out to be two convicted criminals – one of whom was humble before the Lord, while the other was not.

Here’s the problem with the kind of upheaval that James and John were expecting. Whenever we humans try to topple unjust political systems, all we ever seem to succeed in doing is having a different set of humans end up on top. Then—once they are in power—they turn out to be not that different from the ones they replaced. It’s not that particular people are unjust – it’s that our fallen humanity is unjust. And so whoever is put into power—if they follow the ways of the world—is going to end up just as cruel and unjust as anyone else. Simply changing the people in charge doesn’t cut it. Neither does changing the political system. Ultimately, change needs to happen *in the depths of our souls*.

So, instead of kicking out the Romans and installing himself as king, Jesus does something very different. In his passion and death, Jesus takes the world’s ideas of power and glory – *and turns them upside-down*. The cross—as the revelation of *true* power and glory—undermines the powerbrokers and political systems of *every* age.

The cross shows us that *ultimate* authority is not demonstrated in worldly shows of force, but in self-sacrificial love.

One of the problems that the disciples had—and which all of *us* can fall into ourselves—is to think that the president, or the boss, or the coach, or the bishop, is the person in the most important place. We see who has the power—in the worldly sense—and we think, “That’s the place to be.” And so James and John saw Jesus as someone who was going places, and they wanted to go along for the ride, despite being totally unprepared. Little did they know that the kingdom he spoke of is not of this world. And sure, he was going places – places like the cross, to die for our salvation!

One of the most important things that Jesus taught us is that—in God’s eyes—the most important person often isn’t the one with the fancy job title or the worldly power. In God’s eyes, the most important person is the one who is willing to help others; the one who is willing to put other people first; the one who is willing to look out for people who are being hurt, or being made fun of, or being taken advantage of. As Jesus said in the Gospel: “Anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant.”

And the good thing about this is that you don’t need to be the boss to be able to do this. The children here don’t even need to wait until they’re grown-ups. You can always serve Jesus—right here, right now—regardless of the situation you find yourself in. You can always try to help people in need or those who have been hurt.

So here’s my advice. Don’t spend all your time trying to be the most popular—or the most influential—person you know. Looking good in the eyes of others is ultimately not that important. If you really want to make your life worth something, spend your time trying to make God happy – do your best to grow closer to Christ, through prayer, and by serving him in others.

This may seem like foolishness in the eyes of the world, but as Saint Paul once wrote, “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom.” And the irony is that a life of serving and helping other people for the sake of Jesus actually gives us more meaning and fulfillment in this life than worldly success ever could.

It is only in God’s embrace—precisely because he never tires to draw us to himself—that we experience a love that can endure all injustice, and a mercy that overcomes every offence. As recipients of his self-sacrificing love, we are emboldened to lay down *our own* lives as servants of all, and in so doing, to share in the greater glory of God. This is our duty and our privilege, as disciples of the crucified and risen Lord.