

To Serve and to Reign

October 19, 2018 By Deacon Matthew Newsome
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

Jesus has a way of turning our expectations on their heads. He refuses to conform to the mold we make for him. The people of Israel expected a Messiah who would be a political savior, a warrior, a king. They expected a Messiah who would free them from their suffering. They didn't expect one who would suffer.

In the first reading this Sunday, Isaiah prophesies about the suffering servant. "Through his suffering, my servant shall justify many" (Is 53:11). The second reading from Hebrews says of Christ: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way" (Heb 4:15). Jesus, our God, knows suffering and so is able to be compassionate (from the Latin to suffer with) to us in our suffering.

Servant Leadership

In being both suffering servant and high priest, Christ also turns our idea of leadership in its head. This is on display in this Sunday's gospel. James and John ask Jesus to sit at his right and left in the heavenly kingdom. But they don't know what they are asking for. To share in Christ's glory means sharing in his suffering. Jesus tells them, "Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" He is speaking of his passion and death.

James and John haven't figured out yet (they will) that to be true leaders of the people, after the model of Christ, they must share in their weakness, just as Christ shared our weakness. They thought — like most of the world thinks — that to be a leader means being above the people, to receive a place of honor and special considerations. Jesus turns their expectations on their heads.

"You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt," Jesus points out. "But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:42-45).

Jesus completely flips our expectations around by showing us how the One who has the greatest authority of all — the Author Himself, God the Creator — when he becomes incarnate and dwells among us (which in itself is an act of extreme humility) does so not as a tyrant but as one who serves. And how does our Lord serve? He gives his life as a ransom for many.

Serving God by Serving Others

This is the part of this passage that many people miss. Jesus came to serve and not to be served. But he did not come principally to serve us. Jesus serves God the Father. And it is the will of God the Father that Jesus lead us into heaven by loving us unto death.

Elsewhere in the scriptures St. Paul calls us to share in the reign of Christ (2 Tim 2:12). If we want to share in his reign, then we must learn to rule as Christ rules. We must learn to lead as Christ leads. We must learn to love as Christ loves.

The leadership Jesus models for us is principally one of compassion, of suffering with. To model Christ, we mustn't be afraid to share in the sufferings of others. And even more than that, we must be willing to suffer ourselves for the good of others. Christian leadership is oriented toward the good of those being led, not the exaltation of the leader. This is exhibited most beautifully in the lives of the saints who gave themselves in service to the most downtrodden in society, such as St. Francis of Assisi, St. Vincent de Paul, and St. Martin of Tours.

St. Martin of Tours

St. Martin lived during the fourth century, and before he became a bishop he was a cavalry soldier. One cold winter day on patrol he encountered a beggar, nearly naked, freezing to death. Martin took off his warm cloak and used his sword to cut it into two pieces, giving the better half to the beggar and keeping the lesser portion for himself. In order to share his warmth with the beggar, Martin was willing to share in the beggar's cold. Willingness to endure suffering for the sake of others is the heart of Christian leadership.

St. Martin reportedly received a vision that night in a dream. He saw Jesus, standing among the saints, wearing the half of the cloak that Martin gave to the beggar. He was showing it to the saints and saying, "See! This is the mantle that Martin gave me!"

When we give ourselves in service to others after the model of Christ, we are in fact serving Christ. This is the meaning of the words, "Whatever you have done for one of the least of these, you have done for me" (Mt 25:40).

And here, too, Jesus flips our expectations on their heads. For in serving Christ we become not his slave, but his friend; and more than his friend, we become co-heirs of his kingdom, and so share in the glory of his eternal reign.

Whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all (Mk 10:44).

If we have died with him, we shall also live with him; if we persevere we shall also reign with him (2 Tim 2:11-12).