Dear Friends,

Secret of Greatness

Today’s liturgy is about service. In the opening prayer we ask for “strength and joy in serving God as followers of Christ.” The First Reading is from the fourth servant song of Second Isaiah: the prophet sings of one who “gives his life as an offering”. The Gospel is about disciples who want to be important. Jesus teaches them this lesson: “whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all”. With a mindset of discipleship as a spiritual path we might be surprised at the audacity of James and John in today’s gospel who dared to voice their selfish ambitions. They felt that they should sit at the right hand and left hand of the Lord when Jesus came into His Glory. They wanted to lord it over the other disciples. Or at least they wanted it to be clear that they were much better than the others. Jesus told them that they were clueless. They didn’t understand where greatness came from.

There are many people in all walks of life who strut around as legends in their own minds. They may be professionals, like lawyers or doctors or professors who look down on others, or they may be people who hold a position of respect in their families, like parents or grandparents, but do so in an arrogant way, as tyrants rather than as sources of family love. Perhaps we all do this at times. We may act as though we are great, but the truth is that those who think that they are ‘great’, are, like James and John, clueless. They, we, don’t understand from where greatness comes.

Jesus not only explains how to be great but shows it by his life. He told James and John, and He tells us, that greatness comes through service. On the night of the Last Supper, before Jesus gave us His Body and Blood, He washed the feet of His disciples, and then gave them and us this mandate: what you have seen me do, you also must do. That was the path to greatness. When the possibilities were infinite before Christ, he chose to do what only a slave in the Mediterranean culture was expected to do. When the mind transcends human considerations, ‘greatness’ chooses the path of humility.

Life of St. Teresa of Calcutta is one tremendous example. I always considered it a privilege and grace to have listened to her on number of occasions. She always shied away from accolades and attention and conveyed the simple message that everyone can make the world a better place if we can look out for ways to serve. The only way to do it is to see the divine presence in everyone. She died in 1997, but the impact of her mission is seen around the world even today.

All of us have different gifts. We have a responsibility to develop our gifts in service to the Lord. What can I do best? What do you do best? Some people can care for the incarcerated with mercy, compassion, and justice. Others have a great deal of empathy for the sick. Still others have a heart for the poor. Some are capable of teaching. Others are great parents not just to their own children but to those orphaned by the circumstances of their lives. We all have many talents. Our talents are given to us to serve others. We are called to develop these talents. We are called to greatness. It is important that we have this conversation in our families that our children can grasp this message early on. We were given this Grace of being a Christian freely by the Lord. In spite of our weakness and littleness He makes us good enough for service.

It is not the size of a person’s entourage or fame that demonstrates that he or she is great. It is not the position of authority that a person holds that demonstrates his or her greatness. True greatness come from Jesus Christ. He calls us to be people of service. Our strength comes from following in the footsteps of this Master, who “has not come to be served but to serve.”

Be blessed,
Fr. Tom Kunnel C.O.

October 17, 2021

29th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
WORSHIP & MEDITATION

FIRST READING
If he gives his life as an offering for sin, he shall see his descendants in a long life. (Is 53:10)

PSALM
Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you. (Ps 33)

SECOND READING
So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help. (Heb 4:16)

GOSPEL MEDITATION
Encourage Deeper Understanding of Scripture

“What do you wish me to do for you?” Whether we realize it, this is a question God is always asking. It’s an important question because the answer we provide will reveal a great deal about where our hearts lie. Our requests of God can often appear very noble and altruistic. They consist of requests for healing for someone in need of prayers, successful resolution of a personal conflict, assistance in overcoming a disease and myriad other desires for both ourselves and others. We are especially concerned about those we love and can easily find ourselves bringing their struggles to God for a hearing in our prayer.

Is that really all that prayer is about? The woman in today’s Gospel, having been put in her place by Jesus, was only looking out for the wellbeing of her sons. She was doing what mothers do, protecting and securing the livelihood of her children. But she was sadly mistaken, her request was not granted. We all make this same misguided mistake from time to time. The goal of prayer is not to convince God of the worthiness of our agenda or to gain a hearing. Sometimes we believe that the more we multiply our prayers or discover the right combination of supplications that we will receive more of God’s attention. That’s not how it works. Even though God desires to hear, know, and be an intimate part of what is on our minds, it goes much deeper.

What we need from God is a relationship. It’s a relationship that guides and immerses us in the very stuff of life and in the direction of the Gospel. This relationship sees God’s kingdom and agenda, not our own, as what is most important. It builds the strength of character necessary to bring God’s Gospel into a world that may not receive it with open arms. It may cause us discomfort and suffering. We are asked to heroically journey with God through suffering, hardship, ridicule, and even death! Ultimately, our desire from God must become our desire for God. It is only when this happens that the powerful words “thy will be done” will be found with sincerity and humility on our lips. Whatever God wishes becomes what we wish as we see this glorious union of wills. Our humble lives will then become powerful witnesses, and what happens to us in God’s eternal kingdom the result of his mercy. We become true servants and find ourselves discovering God’s definition of success. That definition has nothing at all to do with status, income, or privilege.
The first reading, ISAIAH 53:10-11. This reading forms part of one of the famous four passages from the second part of Isaiah known as the Songs of the Suffering Servant, foreshadowing aspects of Jesus’ life and mission. In Isaiah, the Suffering Servant probably refers to a single individual, or to a remnant of the faithful within Israel, or to some other religious reformer who will bring about peace and restoration. Isaiah speaks of God crushing the Suffering Servant (Jesus) with suffering. “By His sufferings shall My servant justify many.” But there’s a problem with these alternative answers, and if you look at the whole passage about the Suffering Servant, it becomes clear why this cannot be about anyone else but Jesus Christ.

Why the Suffering Servant has to be Jesus

God alone has the authority—and ability—to forgive sins. In fact, that’s one of the reasons the Pharisees and religious leaders had such a problem with Jesus: he claimed he had the authority to forgive sins (Matthew 9:1-8).

While the Suffering Servant doesn’t give us a picture of someone forgiving sins themself, it does tell us that the servant:

- Suffered in our place (Isaiah 53:4)
- Bore the punishment for our sins and even the sin itself (Isaiah 53:5, 11, 12)
- Interceded on our behalf (Isaiah 53:12)

This passage is about humanity’s atonement: our reconciliation with God. If the Suffering Servant was about someone who already lived and died prior to Jesus, that would seem to imply that at least Israel already had a restored relationship with God.

Centuries later, Jesus would fulfill each piece of that prophecy—even occasionally going out of his way to do so (Luke 22:36–38).

The second reading, Hebrews 4:14-16

The Letter to the Hebrews was written to bolster the Faith of Jewish converts to Christianity. They suffered the contempt of former Jewish friends who had not been converted, and they felt nostalgia for the institutions of Judaism, such as rituals, sacrifices, and the priesthood. This letter tries to show them how they still have all these “missing” things, and in a better form in Christianity than they had in Judaism. While the first reading from Isaiah prophesies the necessary, sacrificial role of God’s servant, Jesus, in the plan of salvation, the author of Hebrews affirms Jesus’ priestly activity. Since the Jewish converts to Christ did not have the priests they were used to, the author of Hebrews argues that Jesus is the true High Priest, superior to and far better than the Jewish priests because He, the Son of God, shares our fragile, suffering humanity. Thus, we can “approach his throne of grace confidently to receive mercy,” because Jesus understands us. Later, in Heb 9:10-14, St. Paul presents Jesus as both sacrificial victim and priest. In both death and Resurrection, Jesus functions both as the Priest sacrificing the victim and as the Victim sacrificed.

GOSPEL INSIGHTS: Our Gospel reading for today is another classic text on the question of ambition. For the third time, (Mk 8:31, 9:31, 10:32), Jesus predicts swiftly approaching sufferings ending in death, but followed by resurrection on the third day. In spite of Jesus’ two previous predictions, James and John are still thinking of Jesus as a revolutionary freedom-fighter. They share their contemporaries’ Jewish belief that the Messiah will be a political king, sitting on David’s throne and ruling over a reunified Israel. They are sure that the purpose of Jesus’ final trip to Jerusalem is to overthrow the Roman rulers. Hence, they want an assurance from Jesus that they will be the first- and second-in-command in the coming Messianic Kingdom of God. According to Middle Eastern custom, the seats on the right and left sides of the host were the places of honor, granted to the host’s closest friends and associates, or those the host wished particularly to recognize.

Jesus tells the apostles plainly what the nature of the Messianic mission is, how it will be accomplished and what should be the criteria of greatness among the disciples. Jesus summarizes the Messianic mission in one sentence: “The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” It is in service and humility, Jesus says, that one will find true greatness in the eyes of God. Jesus also explains that the accomplishment of the Messianic mission demands the Messiah’s freely accepting and undergoing crucifixion, as a sacrifice to save people from their sins. Here, Jesus challenges the apostles to share not only the power, but the service, sacrificing themselves for others as Jesus will do. According to Jesus, greatness consists not in what we have, nor in what we can get from others but in what we give to others. The CEO in Jesus’ kingdom is the one who serves the needs of all the others. The test of greatness in the reign of God is not how many people are in one’s service but how one may serve the many. Jesus thus overthrows all our values, teaching us that true greatness consists in loving, humble, and sacrificial service. Jesus has identified authority with selfless service and loving sacrifice.

Service is sacrifice: extending a helping hand to those in need translates love into meaningful deeds. Jesus clearly teaches that when power and authority are used in selfish ways, for personal gain, pleasure or advantage, instead of on behalf of others, they cease to be Christian, and those who make this error become “like the leaders of the Gentiles.” St. Paul, in Rom 1:1, says: “From Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus.” No wonder the official title of the popes down through the centuries has been, “Servant of the servants of God!”
We are invited to servant leadership:

We are a community of equals and we share in the responsibilities of being community. In order to be effective, we need leaders – both ordained, as ministerial priests, and lay. These servants have been raised up from among us to call us to order, to be the ground on which the rest of us can move around, refining our lives as followers of Jesus. We need leaders who will help us to form personal relationships with God and with each other that will assist us to become what we must be in order to wash one another’s feet. We require leaders to call us to the ways of social justice. We need leaders who tie us to other communities and groups who share similar values. Finally, we need leaders who can break open the Word for us, who can lead us in our prayer, offering us on the altar, and who can draw us together as sacrament. No one of us possesses all that we as a community need. Our job as servant leaders is to evoke, to recognize, to nurture, to celebrate, and to help unify the gifts of the Holy Spirit at work here in our community.

We have this possibility of becoming “partners” with Jesus, to be a servant just like Him – “there is no other ladder by which we may get to Heaven” (CCC #618).

“Our fidelity to the Lord depends on our willingness to serve. And we know this often costs, because ‘it tastes like a cross.’ But, as our care and availability toward others grow, we become freer inside, more like Jesus. The more we serve, the more we are aware of God’s presence. Above all, when we serve those who cannot give anything in return, the poor, embracing their difficulties and needs with tender compassion, and we in turn discover God’s love and embrace there.

The true measure of success is what you give, not what you have.”

Pope Francis, Sept 19, 2021

QUIZ TIME

1. In the first reading, what does it say God’s servant will save people through?
   A. His knowledge  B. His power  C. A strong army  D. His suffering

2. How many times did Jesus sin when He was tested?
   A. Never  B. Only once  C. Twice  D. No one knows

3. What favor do James and John ask Jesus for?
   A. To be the first two popes  
   B. To get the most money  
   C. To become angels  
   D. To sit at the right and left side of Jesus in His Kingdom

4. What does Jesus ask James and John in response to their request?
   A. If they will be good Apostles  
   B. If they can suffer, as He will suffer  
   C. If they can keep a secret  
   D. If they want to start religious orders

5. Jesus says that whoever wants to be great, must be what?
   A. Really smart  
   B. Very strong  
   C. A hard worker  
   D. A servant

QUIZ ANSWERS


1. Can God use our actions or our suffering to accomplish God’s work in the world today? Discuss

2. Jesus was tempted. What is your experience of temptation?

3. What does unselfish service look like in our parish, work or home? Could it change the world in some way? How?

RESOURCES USED WITH PERMISSION FROM FR TONY HOMILIES, SUNDAY WEBSITE – ST LOUIS UNIVERSITY, LPI, SERMON CENTRAL, CATHOLIC BRAIN

www.stjohnnewman.org