

Twenty Ninth Sunday of the year – October 18, 2015

Readings: Isaiah 53:10-11; Hebrews 4:14-16; Mark 10:35-45

God has a prominent place in the life of every individual. He is the one who has created every person and given life and sustenance, continually has given his protection and care. He is the one who is all powerful, all knowing, unchangeable, omnipresent and perfectly good. He is simultaneously transcendent and immanent, creator of the world, distinct from and superior to it and at the same time present to human persons and to every smallest particle of creation. He loves us abundantly and he has sent his son for us as his generous gift towards each individual. This God who is supreme and generous always makes demands of us. He calls us to be humble and to live in the service to others. He is present there in the midst of all pain and suffering with his guiding hand. All the three readings of today touch the theme of suffering. In the first reading of today we hear God praising a loyal Servant. Through his sufferings and death he has won healing for many. This suffering servant will offer his life in atonement. In the second reading Jesus is presented to us as a High Priest who becomes the mediator between God and man restoring all things to the Father. Since he experienced struggles of life on earth, he can sympathize with us weak human beings. He can feel for us in our weakness. In the Gospel Jesus teaches James and John and the other disciples that the real pathway to glory and honor is service and becoming a servant. The Son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Our Christian life can be summarized as a call to serve.

Prophet Isaiah in the first reading speaks of the sufferings endured by the servant. This reading is taken from the closing verses of the servant song in Isaiah where the poem begins and ends with the testimony from God about the accomplishments of the servant. His personal self reflects of his life telling us how generously and submissively he gave himself up. There is the admiration of the sacrifice made by the individual for others. They marvel at the wonderful things the Servant accomplished even though the Servant could be summarily dismissed by the world. This servant suffers and is crushed. He faces the hatred and rejection from people. In the context of Isaiah, the Servant represents the ideal Israel, repentant of the sins of the past and now ready to serve God in the world. In their ignorance the Servant's contemporaries tormented him, killed him and assigned him a grave among the wicked. Amazingly God is pleased with him because by his suffering and death the servant won the forgiveness and healing for the world. This is the victory of the servant and for this he is exalted by God and he enjoys a life beyond the ordinary. He has the right relationship with God. He sees the light and enjoys

a life beyond the ordinary. By his suffering and death the Servant won forgiveness and healing for the world.

The Second Reading from the letter to the Hebrews urges us to stand steadfast in faith, for our Leader and High Priest is none other than Jesus, the Son of God. As a High priest he is chosen to be the mediator between God and man. In Jesus we have the Supreme High Priest who has offered full atonement for us and has suffered more than we ever can. He understands our weaknesses and our needs. He is the Son of God and can accomplish great things for us. He is also human and knows what it is to be tested. Therefore he can sympathize with us in all our struggles. He carried out the expiation rites on the Day of Atonement to sprinkle the ark with the blood of the sacrifices. No other priest could enter there but Jesus has gone into the Holy of Holies with his own blood and has sprinkled it on the altar for the forgiveness of sins. This High Priest was tempted while on earth but he never gave in to any of these temptations and therefore emerged victorious over the human fear of suffering. Now Jesus is glorified in his humanity and has entered into heaven. Therefore we can confidently have recourse in our difficulties to the throne of God, for Christ is there to recommend our Petitions to his Father. He is now our advocate with God the Father we have the confidence that God's mercy and grace are always available. We can call him in all our needs and God will give us the necessary strength to overcome the temptations and difficulties.

This Sunday's Gospel recounts a dialogue which took place between Jesus and the sons of Zebedee: James and John. These disciples desired at any price, to sit next to Jesus in Paradise. Indeed, this episode is reported differently by Saint Matthew. According to him, it is the mother of James and John who requests this favor of Jesus for her two sons. This may reflect the respect the Apostles held by the time Matthew wrote the gospel and he places the disciples in the background. At this juncture it looks as if the two brothers were responding to the third prediction of Jesus regarding his passion and death. This pronouncement follows the two previous predictions of Jesus about his passion, suffering, death and Resurrection. In each case the response of the disciples manifested a basic misunderstanding of what Jesus had been talking about. Jesus was talking about his suffering death and service while the disciples were constantly focused on power fame and glory. Jesus attempted to counter their misunderstanding with a corrective teaching regarding the meaning of discipleship. Here we have the two brothers, who belong to the innermost circle of Jesus' disciples, trying to exert their influence on Jesus and snatch the power they were looking for. They came to Jesus with their request the moment Jesus had finished telling them about his suffering, death and his resurrection. Their opening gambit seemed a quite modest request as they asked

Jesus for a favor. Jesus was not so easily duped and would have understood their intention. Yet he asked them a question to explain clearly their demand. It was much like the question he asked before healing the blind man and the leper. The two brothers had heard Jesus speaking of suffering, death and new life. They had recognized Jesus as the Messiah-King of Israel and heard him refer often to "his kingdom". They ask him to give them the two top places in his royal kingdom, one on his right and the other on his left when he comes into his glory. Mark tells us that their request showed that they had no understanding whatever of what Jesus had told them about his work as Messiah.

Jesus probes them a bit, asking if they can undergo the sufferings he will have to undergo. Quickly they responded that they were willing, but we know immediately that they were unable to. They responded to him without any further understanding that it was possible for them to drink the chalice of Jesus. Their response may have been very genuine but it was clear they had no understanding of how this King would triumph by emptying himself to the lowest human level and only then enter his kingdom. Ironically, the places on the right and left of Jesus will end up being crosses just like the one he will hang on. The only concession Jesus made was to affirm that James and John will indeed drink the cup and be baptized into his sufferings. But they are not granted the places of honor they requested. Jesus told them clearly that they would indeed be ready to drink the cup that he drinks and accept the baptism, with which he is baptized, but to sit at his right hand or at his left is not for him to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by the Father from eternity. Jesus spoke of his Passion and he spoke first as a man, though he is also God and Lord, the equal of the Father. Jesus here made a point of rendering honor and glory to his Father: it is the Father who makes the decision to grant such and such a place in the Kingdom of God. For the Father is the first in the Most Holy Trinity: it is he and he alone who determine the order of all things. At the same time the glory of Heaven is not acquired without effort or work. The glory of the Resurrection is attained through the ignominy of the Passion and the Cross. If we do not wear the crown of thorns in this life, we will never be given the crown of glory in Heaven.

Thinking that James and John will get those places of honor the other ten disciples were upset with the two brothers. They too may have been seeking special places and highest position around his heavenly Throne. Understandably, when these ten heard of the ambition of the two brothers they were very angry. It was not because they disagreed but because they felt cheated. These two had gone behind their backs and pulled a fast one. They too had totally missed the point. Jesus makes the point once again with his corrective teaching about true greatness not being

centered in authoritarian ruling but in service. As he brought them all together, he explained to them his view of greatness and success in life. There is only one way to greatness and it is his way. Teaching them to be spiritually minded, Jesus told the disciples, to become great, they have to be as servants; to be first, they must be slaves to all. Jesus himself did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. His example of perfect love is our example. For them the model for authentic service is Jesus himself whose true authority was rooted in service towards all. There is no indication in this passage of the Gospel that the disciples ever understood what Jesus was saying about discipleship. This teaching on discipleship was challenging when Jesus offered it to them and it has remained so up to the present time.

Greatness consists not in what we have, or in what we can get from others but in what we can give of ourselves to others. In our own time, I suppose Mother Teresa has been an outstanding example. Her greatness was in the giving of her whole self to the very lowest, treating them as brothers and sisters and living close to them and like them. And the people of India recognized that. Her greatness was not in her fame or even in her reputation for holiness but because of her spirit of service to those most neglected and to those in need. Mother Teresa was a great missionary bringing the Gospel message of service to the very poorest. She and her sisters went on missionary work to New York and Los Angeles, to London and even Rome. Like James and John and the other disciples, like Mother Teresa and many others, we are all called to be missionaries. To be good missionaries we have to hear Jesus' words about where real greatness lies. It is a message that is not always easy to hear in a society like ours. We are all called to be not only disciples and followers but also apostles and missionaries and to be of service to our brothers and sisters.

Thus to be a disciple of Jesus we must accept our call to serve others as he served. At the Last Supper Jesus gave the example and washed the feet of his disciples and told them that they too ought to do likewise if they choose to be his disciples. At certain times the disciples of Jesus had the basic misunderstanding of his mission and message. While Jesus was preaching on the Gospel of suffering, death and service, they were looking for power, fame and glory. We all know the story of a twentieth century saint, Kolbe and his sacrifice. On August 14, 1941, Saint Maximilian Kolbe died of starvation in the place of a young father so that he may live. We view this act of self-sacrifice as extremely beautiful Christian love. What Jesus has done for each and every one of us far surpasses what St. Maximilian has done for the young man. Through Jesus, we are not gaining the normal life span of a human being on earth, but eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

In our society the word service has many meanings; but today as we celebrate the Mission Sunday it includes the efforts of men, women and children who work to spread the Gospel and offer Christ's healing and forgiveness to those who have never encountered him. Hence service is an essential component of Christianity. Believing in God and acknowledging Jesus as our Lord and master are important as are study, prayer and meditation; but the true mark of our faith is how we treat others in life. As Christians we are all called to follow Christ with an attitude of service towards others. As many in our society strive for success, fame and wealth, followers of Christ are called upon to look for opportunities to serve others. Our celebration of this Eucharist is an acknowledgement of our dependence on God and each other and our willingness to follow the example of Jesus Christ.

James and John wanted to be the first at Jesus' side in Heaven. The ten others were indignant at such a request. The Lord as he spoke to them ordered everything and put everyone on an equal footing: the master must become the slave; the first must be the last. In this way, everyone will be happy. In heaven, it is the same. Certainly, there is an order among the elect of God and each is in his place, but none of them can express any dissatisfaction at all: each person is perfectly happy in the place which he occupies. It is precisely this same place, this precise order which produces the happiness of the elect of God in Heaven. For, this place, this order, allows the realization of a perfect and structured edifice: the House of God. This ideal is important for us as we celebrate the mission Sunday today. World Mission Sunday highlights our responsibility to help and spread the message found in the scriptures. We do not have to be experts in evangelization. We all of us are called to work with our brothers and sisters to build the kingdom of God here on earth. Our mission work has to be one of service as Jesus calls us do.

In a certain village in Umbria (Italy), there lived a man who was always bewailing his lot. He was a Christian, and found the weight of his cross too heavy to bear. One night, before going to sleep, he begged God to let him change his burden. That night he had a dream; the Lord led him to a warehouse. "Go ahead and change it," he said. The man saw crosses of all sizes and shapes, with the names of their owners. He picked an average size cross – but when he saw the name of an old friend written on it, he left it aside. Finally, as God had permitted, he chose the smallest cross he could find. To his surprise, he saw his own name written on it.

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