

Homily for Trinity XX 2021 - MORE LESSONS IN HUMILITY

In this week's gospel, Jesus' disciples once again get it all wrong. We have heard a series of gospels that highlight their human shortcomings of recent weeks.

Not too long ago we heard the disciples arguing about which one of them was the most important. Then in another gospel reading they became indignant because a total stranger was healing people in the Lord's name.

In this week's gospel reading, James and John approached Jesus with the request: "Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left." They didn't even say please! It's as though they were asking for a blank cheque! They were demanding that they be given the most important positions in Jesus' kingdom.

The 9th and 10th chapters of Mark's gospel could easily be called the "These people just don't get it!" chapters. After all that time listening to Jesus teach about humility, sacrifice, and service; after hearing Jesus explain—and demonstrate by example—that only when we stop focusing on ourselves will we ever find true peace and fulfilment, the disciples still could not stop viewing things with a "what's in it for me?" attitude.

It's tempting to look at the disciples and say, "How many times did they have to be told?" But we need to be a little more thoughtful than that. Instead of writing off the disciples as incorrigibly slow learners, we should look to see if their behaviour reflects our own actions and attitudes. We should realise that they were simply demonstrating one of the most basic of human inclinations in its purest form. And we should see what lessons we can learn from it all.

For some reason, it's always easy to point out other people's mistakes. It's easy enough to write and speak about Jesus' message of selflessness and humility. It's an entirely different thing to make it a part of life and live it out each day. That is because it is so incredibly difficult to let go of the "*what's in it for me?*" yardstick that seems to be at the heart of just about everything we do.

The author C.S. Lewis was a great Christian of his time. A well loved, humble and self-effacing man who was given a great gift of communicating faith in his time yet he once wrote these words in a poem to his wife:

All this flashy rhetoric about loving you.

I never had a selfless thought since I was born.

**I am mercenary and self-seeking through and through:
I want God, you, and all friends, merely to serve my turn.**

**Peace, re-assurance, pleasure, are the goals I seek,
I cannot crawl one inch outside my proper skin:
I talk of love—a scholar's parrot may talk Greek—
But, self-imprisoned, always end where I begin.**

It's not terribly pleasant to read about the disciple's behaviour and then come to the realisation that they reflect our own actions as if in a mirror. But then again, I suppose God displayed their foibles in such detail in Scripture for a very good reason. I suspect He wants us to see ourselves in them and learn from it.

If James and John only knew what was in store for them. They did not receive exalted positions in Jesus' earthly kingdom. The coming decades proved to be severely challenging, with James being murdered at an early age because of his faith in Christ, and John being exiled to the prison island of Patmos, where he lived out his life in poverty and hardship. But the Lord, in His mysterious ways, actually gave the two brothers what they requested—just not in the way they imagined it. They did receive exalted positions in Jesus' kingdom, not here on earth, but in Heaven for all eternity.

For those of us still trying to fight the good fight here on earth, we need to do that most difficult of things: put God's will ahead of our will. The key is humility and trust. If we can be humble enough to admit our need of God for a start we just might be on the right track. If we trust that God loves us more than we can imagine and that He will never leave us nor forsake us, we can be free of the anxiety and fear that often paralyses us from doing what God wants us to do.

The lives of the disciples can be great examples for us—both as inspiration for what they did right, and as a warning for what they did wrong. However, there is little or no point in pondering their lives in a detached, academic sort of way, we need to put it into action. That is the hardest thing of all, but in the end the most rewarding.

The final words of Christ in today's gospel often ring in my ears calling and recalling me to what is the essence of a Christian life. "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."