

The 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

Oct. 21, 2018

In the Year 2000, I went to Italy as a Chaplain with a pilgrimage group going to Rome for the Eucharistic Congress. While the highlight of this trip was the final three Days in Rome for the Congress, those three days were preceded by 10 days where we travelled around Italy, exploring places like Milan, Padua, Venice, Florence and Assisi. Our group went as far south as Naples. In Naples, some of our group and I took a boat to the Island of Capri, which is in the Bay of Naples. A few of us then took a 45-minute boat tour around the Island.

During this tour I saw these sheer 300-foot cliffs where, it is reputed, the Roman Emperor Tiberius dispatched his enemies by throwing them off these cliffs to their deaths. Emperor Tiberius was one of the more famous ancient residents of the Island of Capri. He had a Villa built on the Island and lived there permanently from about 27 to 37 AD. It was here that he gave himself up to a life of debauchery. He was an absentee Emperor, leaving the running of his Empire and Rome to his lackeys, like Sejanus, who orchestrated a series of purge trials in Rome to remove his enemies, instigating a reign of terror in the city of Rome. Tiberius' life ended when he was smothered to death with his own bed clothes, by order of his grand-nephew Caligula. Caligula reigned four years after Tiberius and proved to be a worse despot than his grand-uncle.

In looking at those cliffs on the Island of Capri where Tiberius disposed of his enemies (and slaves when he tired of them), I was aware that Jesus Christ lived all his young adulthood, earthly ministry, passion, death and resurrection during Tiberius' reign. I can't imagine a greater contrast, in terms of leadership models, than between these two men. For Tiberius, leadership offered him the opportunity to satiate all his debauched desires, to delegate his responsibilities to corrupt and violent men, and to have his enemies destroyed in cruel, vengeful and merciless ways. Then we have, in the very same generation, Jesus Christ teaching a radically different model of leadership to his apostles and disciples.

The first reading gives us a background to Jesus' model of leadership. The Prophet Isaiah exercised his prophetic ministry some 800 years before Christ Jesus' incarnation. This is remarkable given that the Book of the Prophet Isaiah is full of prophetic utterances concerning the birth, life and death of Jesus Christ. Among these prophecies are four passages, collectively known as *Songs of the Suffering Servant*, which are read during Holy Week and Good Friday. The First Reading is a passage drawn from the fourth Suffering Servant Hymn and is also found in the First Reading of the Good Friday Service. The Prophet Isaiah, looking eight centuries into the future with prophetic insight, describes one who, though innocent, willingly suffers on behalf of the guilty, so that the guilty might be redeemed. The Suffering Servant does this by making his life, as the Prophet Isaiah says, "an offering for sin". In this way, God the Father's will, which is the salvation of his wayward people, will be fulfilled.

This passage also reminds us of the kind of leadership required by those who call themselves Christian, followers of Christ. Christian Service implies self-denial and sacrifice, giving of self, sharing generously not only of our treasure, but also of our time and talent, even to the point where it may hurt, remembering that Christ has already modeled this for us.

The Letter to the Hebrews is addressed to early Jewish converts to the Christian faith. While I believe that the inspired author of this Letter is St. Paul, we do not know for certain who the author is. We do know, however, that this letter was written for Jewish Christians because the letter assumes that those reading this letter or hearing it proclaimed are familiar with Temple liturgical rites, the high priesthood, the Sanctuary and Temple sacrifice offered to God. The author reminds his audience that it is Christ Jesus who perfectly fulfils the role of the high priest, and the purpose of the altar and sacrifice as well, which is our salvation.

The First Reading's connection to Good Friday also applies to the Second Reading, the Letter to the Hebrews, for this passage is drawn from the Second Reading for Good Friday. We notice a pattern here: as Christ's leadership is connected to the sacrifice of himself for the ultimate good of others, their salvation, so our exercise of leadership means a selfless regard for the good of others also.

The author of this letter reminds us that Jesus, although he is high priest, is not aloof. Through his incarnation, his 'enfleshment', he has solidarity with us weak human beings. In his humanity, he is one of us, so we can "approach the throne of grace with boldness" to receive mercy, which is what this high priest desires to give.

This quality of leadership should inspire us, in whatever, form of leadership we exercise, to make ourselves accessible to others and to have a disinterest in the promotion of our own personal agenda. Pope Francis puts it well when, in addressing priestly leadership, he said that the pastors should be "shepherds with the smell of his sheep".

The Apostles do not come off well in the Gospel of Mark. Over the past four weeks, Jesus has reminded them no less than three times of his imminent passion and death. First, Peter outright repudiates Jesus for saying this and, when Jesus speaks of this again, the disciples didn't hear it because they were too busy arguing among themselves who was the greatest of them. In today's Gospel Reading, the brothers James and John are jockeying for positions of prestige and honour in the Kingdom of God. They just don't seem to get it! The adage "in one ear and out the other" seems to apply here.

I for one cannot get too upset with the apostles, because I recognize something here that is both universal and personal—the temptation to focus on self-advancement and my individual pursuit of perks. For us priests, this can manifest itself as clericalism, and can reveal itself in scandalous ways, as recent history attests.

Jesus presents the Apostles with an alternate model of leadership. A leader must lead by serving and he himself models this for us, as found in the first two readings. This model of

leadership was shocking to Jesus' disciples because the dominant model of leadership in their time was the tyrant, like Emperor Tiberius. While Jesus acknowledged that they lived in a time of tyrants, Christian leadership called for something different. The exercise of leadership was not an opportunity to seek out perks, prestige and benefits of a material or honorary kind. Jesus is saying "if you want to be a leader, watch me and imitate me". Jesus was God from God but, as St. Paul reminded the Philippians in his letter addressed to them, "he took the form of a slave". Jesus' servant leadership was of no personal benefit to himself but was an overwhelming benefit to us. As the suffering servant and the high priest, his leadership turned death to life, despair into ecstatic hope and estrangement into eternal communion.

All leadership in the Church, whether exercised as a bishop, priest, layperson, deacon or religious begins with servanthood. Jesus, as suffering servant and high priest, perfectly models this for us, and we would be wise to exercise our leadership with him as our model.