



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

Leadership Qualifications

Readings: Isaiah 53: 10-11, Ps 32, Hebrews 4: 14-16, Mark 10: 35-45

There are various models of leadership and a veritable smorgasbord of options for putting them into practice. In today's Gospel we see an unedifying bid for power by a key family in the earliest entourage of Jesus. The 'Sons of Thunder', James and John, take Jesus on one side and bend his ear with their ambition. They have assessed the politics of the group and clearly reckon that the leadership roles, next to Christ, are best handled by them. In so doing they are fully conscious of the implications of such a decision overturning Jesus' clear choice to appoint Peter as the leader of the soon-to-be Church. Given the stumbling, often flawed performance of Peter, it is perhaps unsurprising that they should think that they know better than Jesus in this matter. They request the key seats at the cabinet table of the coming kingdom and the thrones of glory on Jesus' right and left.

This is no modest bid for power. No wonder the others were furious when they found out. This happy band of brothers riven by dissension and competing claims to power. It is necessary for Jesus to get the Disciples together for a 'team talk' and point out the absurdity of the claim.

The Disciples were still clearly expecting a, humanly speaking, triumph. They would shortly be having to come to terms with apparent disaster and death. The fellowship of the Galilee shoreline is in grave danger of breaking up under the strain of ambition and rivalry.

There are, generally speaking, two sorts of authority. There is the natural charism of authority that a disciple may have and there is the gift of authority that comes with the office. Those without the natural charism of authority, on the whole, struggle to wield the given power of office convincingly. Those with the natural gift needs be constrained in office by a right sense of humility if they are not to become tyrannical.

It is, perhaps, one of the tragedies of our time to find so little gift of the one and so little respect of the other in the governing institutions of our culture. Too often, office has gone, by default, to those whose singular 'talent' is that self-seeking and corrosive ambition that we see in today's Gospel account.

Jesus' response is therefore critical to any Christian definition of authority and to the consequent recalibration of our political and, more importantly, religious and therefore eternal understanding.

Authority is not a gift of the power to 'lord' it over others BUT an invitation to 'serve'. Indeed Jesus uses the word for servant with which we will all be familiar – 'Deacon'. In the traditional sets of vestments before the Council, there was a strip of material that a priest wore over his wrist, like a waiter's towel. Since he had passed through the diaconal stage and his stole, symbolising the slave's towel for washing the feet, had been uncrossed and

become the symbol of his priestly authority under the yoke of Christ, this little strip reminded him that he was still 'a waiter' upon his people. He had not been released from his deaconing but rather that this deaconing had been taken up into his priesthood and he had become, in the words of the greatest title of the successors of Peter, the Servant of the Servants of God.

Thus Jesus instructs his disciples as they argue as to who does what, who is in charge, who is the greatest etc that they are to be slaves. Those who want to follow the Son of Man, please note, will be following the One who came to serve and, even more off-putting to the personally ambitious, to give his life as a ransom for many.

Not quite so many in the queue for that part of the deal.