

Homily—29th Sunday OT; B-cycle

“Jesus summoned them and said to them, ‘You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all.’”

Greatness. We all obsess over greatness. ‘Well, that’s not true Father.

‘I certainly don’t obsess over greatness.’ Sure you do. We all do it to an extent.

We all want to be great in someone else’s eyes.

We want to impress our boss or co-workers. We want our parent’s respect.

We want to be great in the eyes of our friends, or our children, or our significant other, or the person we WANT to be our significant other.

To some degree we all obsess over greatness, and that is why we don’t have peace.

We don’t have peace because in seeking worldly greatness, we measure our value by the perceptions of other people.

The only person we have to impress is God, and God is very easy to impress.

God is impressed by how well we treat others, and we don’t even have to be entirely successful at it, because God is impressed simply by our making the attempt, and not giving up. This is what Jesus is trying to communicate to his apostles.

What’s happened in this gospel? James and John want to sit on Jesus’ left and right when he comes into his glory. There it is! The quest for greatness!

When you’re in your glory Lord, let us have the seats of honor next to you!

And immediately the others get mad at James and John because they think they’re being cheated out of their greatness.

And so Jesus says this verse I quoted a moment ago, to try to change their understanding of what greatness really is.

This weekend we celebrate the feast of our parish patron; Saint John Paul II.

And one of Saint John Paul’s most famous quotes is, “to serve is to reign.”

Saint John Paul is summarizing this gospel passage we heard today from Saint Mark.

But it does beg the question; what exactly is service?

Service is three things; interceding, working, and sacrificing.

Service is interceding. Interceding is when we take an interest in the needs of others.

In our second reading from the letter to the Hebrews the author is explaining that what sets Jesus apart from every other high priest, is that Jesus loved us enough, cared for us enough, to take an interest in what our need was; so much so he left his place in heaven, and became one of us, so as the author here states, so we could have a high priest who was able to sympathize with our weaknesses, because he was tested as we are tested.

Interceding means we have to look around, and see what needs fixing.

Our patron, Saint John Paul II, interceded for us, in that he broke the mold of the papacy forever!

John Paul looked at the Church and said, I have to be a little more hands on than the Popes of the past, and he did. He traveled the world bringing the gospel message. Popes before John Paul didn't do that. They stayed mostly confined to the Vatican. He started World Youth Day to reach out to the Church's young people. Everyone praises Pope Francis for reaching out to so many people, and it's true. Francis does deserve credit for that. But John Paul paved the way for him. Look around your parish, look around your city, look around your country, look around your world and notice what needs to be done, and then ask yourself what can I do to make things better?

That leads to our second element of service, the one we're most familiar with, working.

Once we notice what needs to be done we have to do something about it.

Sitting around complaining doesn't do any good.

Saint John Paul didn't just recognize the needs of the Church that were around him, he did something about it! He tackled the problems head on!

He took on Catholic Academia and brought it back into line with Church teaching.

Saint John Paul wrote more encyclicals than (I believe) any pope prior to him.

And he certainly wrote more on the sacrament of marriage and human sexuality than any other pope. And there's another example.

John Paul recognized what needed to be addressed in the world, a proper understanding of human sexuality, and he took it on himself to fix it.

Again, what is it you have to offer? When you stand before the throne of God what will you tell him was your contribution to make this world a little bit better?

And that leads to the third element of service; sacrifice.

That's the part no one wants to hear about, and yet there's no getting around it.

Our first reading from the prophet Isaiah, Isaiah is complaining about his own afflictions, how he has suffered because of his service to God; and yet he's also prophesizing that this will be the kind of Messiah God will send into the world; a suffering Messiah.

Not a king, like the glory days of David and Solomon, who will restore military and economic might to Israel, but rather a Messiah that will heal souls.

Saint John Paul II achieved one of the most prestigious positions in the world; Pope of the Universal Catholic Church, and yet with that status came with a heavy toll.

He was shot by a would-be assassin, and left a wound that would cause him discomfort for the rest of his life.

He suffered a slow deterioration of his health from Parkinson's disease.

Toward the end of his life he could barely move, and he couldn't even talk with clarity anymore, and yet he kept doing—his—job.

He kept pushing himself to save souls until his last breath on earth.

In our gospel, when James and John make this request of Jesus, how does he respond?

“Can you drink of the cup which I must drink?”

Jesus was referring to his crucifixion. He was referring to his sacrifice.

James and John say “yes” without thinking, because they are so blinded by their desire for greatness, they miss Jesus' meaning.

And so it can also happen to us, that we get so blinded by our desire for greatness that we miss what the Lord is trying to tell us.

We miss that if we are going to change the world, it's going to require some sacrifice.

It means we going to have to shed our desire for greatness, and be content to serve.

When I first came to this assignment I wanted the merger to be successful, I wanted to pay the

debt and get the parish on stable footing because I sought greatness.

I didn't see it then, but looking back, I see it now. I wanted to impress the Bishop.

And honestly, I wanted to be able to dangle that success in the faces of some of my

brother priests who have been less than impressed with me over the years and say,

“Wow! Looky here! Could you have done a job like this?”

That was my pride. That was my ego. That was my sin.

That has now fallen by the wayside. And maybe THAT'S the lesson the Lord has been

trying to pound through this thick Italian skull of mine these past years with the struggles and setbacks I've encountered trying to accomplish these goals.

Now I don't care to be remembered as the pastor who successfully merged the parish, or

paid the debt. I don't need to impress the Bishop.

And I really don't care anymore what my brother priests think of me.

I just want to be remembered as a pastor who worked hard for you.

I want to be remembered as a pastor who served you joyfully.

I want to be remembered as a pastor who loved you like Christ, and inspired you to want

to love like Christ too. That's greatness! That's success!

That's the only success worth having.

Saint John Paul didn't solve the world's problems, but he made a positive impact by

doing those three things; and that is why I am convinced, within my lifetime, the

Church will be calling him John Paul the Great.

Saint John Paul II, pray for me, and pray for us, because to serve is truly to reign.