

October 19, 2003
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Father Charles Bowes

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

God gives the strength to live in the midst of others as one who serves.

In this gospel passage today, chapter 10, we find Saint Mark being very candid. He gives us a description of an event that is more than a bit critical of these two disciples. Imagine the nerve of James and John to ask to sit one on Jesus' left and the other on his right when he comes into his glory. It is little wonder that the other disciples were indignant at overhearing their request. So Saint Luke's gospel makes no mention of this event. And Saint Matthew's gospel removes the criticism by telling us that it was the mother of James and John who dragged them in front of Jesus and put forth this request. Better, I suppose, to be somewhat dominated by a pushy mother than to be pushy yourself. But Saint Matthew was sure that mothers are strong enough to shoulder the blame. It's very likely that his reason for changing the account, this earlier account in Saint Mark, was precisely to remove the criticism of the two apostles. He was writing at least 10 to 20 years after Saint Mark wrote his account, and by that time, those first Christians had a great respect for the apostles who brought them their faith. They were not ready to listen to any negative remarks about them.

We can almost feel the awkward position Jesus finds himself in...how to respond to that request without hurting their feelings or insulting them? So he saves the situation by issuing a challenge: Drink the cup with him, be baptized with him, serve with him. Along the same lines as proclaimed of the suffering servant, Israel, in Isaiah chapter 53, our first reading: "Through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear."

All around us in this competitive world, people are continuously trying to get elected, get promoted, get to the very top.

This pushing and pulling goes on every week, every day, every hour. Who will be first, who will be second, who will be third, who will be the boss?

This isn't bad; someone should be at the top. It's even good, with one condition: the condition Jesus seems to talk about when confronted with James and John and their drive to the top.

In effect, Jesus is saying, "I know why you want to be on the top - I know why you want to be first. I will tell you. You want to have power, power in the old way. You want to make your authority felt. You want to profit from your position. You belong to the old pagan world, a world not yet influenced by me! In my kingdom, in my community, it is not like that."

“There, those with power serve. They make the others grow. They protect the frail ones. They think more about others than about themselves. Look at me. Look at what I do!” That’s the condition Jesus places upon our race to the top - that we use power to serve.

This is one characteristic of the kingdom of God that we would prefer not to talk about. It is not an easy kingdom, not cheap grace. It is not something we work for in order to make it easy on ourselves. It does not guarantee comfort, but only satisfaction and fulfillment. Parents know this or learn this almost immediately when they have children. Anyone who loves knows this. This kingdom of God is a place where we are respected, not because of the position we hold, but for the service we render to others...not a place where people make their authority felt, but rather where they assert their kindness, their gentleness, their tough love. It is not a place where people lord it over others, but rather lift people up and show their love and concern. This is what will make the kingdom on earth more like God’s kingdom, and Jesus gave us the example of how to do that. He even instructed us to pray for it - “thy kingdom come.”

Not a bad index of one’s capacity to serve is the statement: “When my friend weeps, I taste salt.”

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midst of others as one who serves.