

Homily for October 22, 2006
29th Sunday of the Year (B)

By Father Charles Bowes

Isaiah 53:10-11
Psalm 33:4-5, 18-19, 20, 22
Hebrews: 4:14-16
Mark 10:35-45

We become great when greatness no longer matters.

“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. We’re ambitious, up and coming kinds of guys. But we need your help,” say James and John.

“So, what can I do for you?” asks Jesus.

“Simple – give us power, give us status, give us authority. Let one of us sit beside you on the right, the other on the left. Doesn’t matter to us which is which. Just make sure it’s us.”

Jesus sighs. “You don’t have a clue, do you? All this time we spent together and you still haven’t caught on.”

Thank heaven we’re not like James and John! Or are we? If we’re honest with ourselves, we have to admit that there is a part of us that likes the idea of being famous or of being held in esteem by others. Years ago, when I worked in a chancery office – as stressful as it was – a part of me liked having all those titles...superintendent of this, director of that. I guess that’s why we have Miss America pageants and the Muhammad Alis of the world. That’s why we have honors and titles of Monsignor, Cardinal and Knights of Malta. We revel in glory. We make heroes of football and soccer players. We bow and curtsy and kiss the rings of those in power.

A competitive culture hurls us on to excel, to be first. What is important is to win, by hook or by crook, by steroids, or by fixing the game. By all means, win.

Get a title. Not much has changed since Jesus. But he turns the values of the world “topsy-turvy.”

The command of Jesus to serve others won’t guarantee an exciting Rose Bowl game or an action-packed World Series. Humility doesn’t win ball games. But it does win favor with God. Saint Irenaeus, a third century writer, said that the service of Christ revealed God in the most unlikely of places – among the least of the world. That is why he was believable – not because he was powerful and clung to titles and honors. Jesus tells us to get ourselves out of the way. Don’t play kingdom games like James and John. We’ll just straitjacket ourselves chasing a lot of worthless chaff. Do not turn life into an endless power game: “See to it that I sit at your right hand.”

Live life, do good, set yourself aside for others and you’ll experience resurrection. Those who believe in and follow Jesus accept the burden of a lifetime of service (diakonia) without expecting rewards. “The one who would lose his life will save it.” Saint Mark’s Jesus challenges us to decide what our model of life will be. The presence of God is found in service to others.

When the Chancellor of England, Sir Thomas More, fell out of favor with King Henry VIII, he called together his employees and said to them: “Since I’m no longer a great man, I no longer need a great staff.” To which his chief steward replied, “Because, sir, you never clung to greatness, makes you the greater still by far.”

In a week we'll be celebrating Halloween, and I came across an idea that I'm sure has virtually no chance of catching on. But wouldn't it be interesting if our children dressed up in costumes that imitated those who serve? Instead of a football helmet, or a baseball uniform, or witches, or movie stars, or queens and kings, what if they donned the outfits of a hospital volunteer, a nurse, a hospice worker, a firefighter – or whatever uniform symbolizes service rather than power and glory? How do we make Jesus' message come alive?

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