

25th Sunday of the Year

Year B - Series 2

Christ, The Son Of God.

*We worship the Son of God, the wisdom that came down from above
and became the servant of men.*

(Reading: Wisdom 2: 12, 17-20. James 3: 16- 4:3. Mark 9: 30-37)

Thinking about this morning's readings I wondered what people imagined a successful person to be? I supposed that one might ordinarily think in terms of someone who started with little or nothing, who then worked hard and became wealthy.

I concluded that the 'wealthy' bit was probably the image that most immediately came to mind. And I concluded that, because I believe, for most people, financial prosperity is, by far, the primary meaning, and measure, of all success. And we can expect that kind of thinking, or attitude from the world, given its essentially predominant values. In today's Gospel, however, Jesus shows us an altogether different set of values. In any event, no one wants to fail in life. We all want to make a success of it. The difficulty comes in how success is measured.

If we were investing in, say, the stock market, we would consult a stockbroker. If we wanted a singing career, we would seek the help of a voice instructor. If we were trying to grow roses, we would talk with a gardener who had a history of successfully growing roses. So why, then, do we not apply that same common sense to the art of living?

I would hope all of us would agree that the expert on life is Jesus. He knew how to live. And he lived, albeit a short life, but one which has had a profound, enduring impact upon the world. So, what did success mean to him? Our Gospel reading tells us of a day in Capernaum – a day when Jesus talked to his disciples on this all-important subject.

They were just as confused about life as we are. Their aim was to gain prominence and prestige. A debate had broken out among them. They argued as to which of them was the most important, perhaps because they all aspired to that position.

Jesus overheard their argument, and so he told them how to settle it. He said, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all.' That was his formula for being the greatest and being a success.

It was a startling, if not jaw-dropping statement, and it was startling, firstly, for what it didn't say. Notice that Jesus made no mention of wealth. He simply didn't consider it relevant. For Jesus being great had absolutely nothing to do with money. And yet, the world makes it its primary factor.

Clearly, by Jesus' standards, our society has completely missed the point. We have elevated money to a place of importance far beyond anything it deserves. And the same can be said of prestige and prominence. They too, have absolutely nothing to do with Jesus' idea of greatness.

A boss who sits behind a big executive desk, may be a financial wizard, and looked up to by everyone in the firm. Within his/her own cosy empire, and may well be great, but outside his limited circle he could well be a miserable failure at living.

On the other hand, the one who sweeps the factory floors, long after everyone else has gone home, may be of no discernable account in that company, but in his home, he is great because he is deeply loved and respected by all his family and friends.

Unmistakably, this is telling us that station and rank are immaterial. They are mere window dressing. They have nothing to do with greatness as Jesus saw it. According to Jesus, the only thing that counts is service. – “If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all.”

That is arguably the most revolutionary thing Jesus ever said because it seems to fly in the face of the most basic common sense. How can anyone believe that a mere servant is the greatest person in the world? Well, as hard as that is to believe, we must accept it because Jesus said it. And he is always right!

Take a long look back, and name for yourself, the truly great people of history. I wonder whom you would put on the list? I am fairly sure none of us would put oppressive dictators, those who rule with an iron fist. Or grasping, unscrupulous industrial tycoons, who became wealthy by exploiting the masses, only to hog all their wealth for themselves.

I think we would include on our list those people who willingly served the human race, or at least some small part of it. From our vantage point of history, we know well enough that it is only those who served the world, those whom Jesus calls ‘the servants’, they are the ones who deserve to be called great.

Or again, more personally, consider for a moment, those who have been the most important people in our lives. Chances are, they were neither rich nor famous. But even if they were both, I don’t suppose for a second that those were the things that really mattered to you. And whilst I may not be able to tell you their names, I can guess as to what they did. They are the ones who took care of you, when you could not take care of yourself. They are the ones who taught you how to read and write; those who spent time with you when you were lonely, or corrected you when you went astray, or encouraged you in the right path.

The most important people in your life – in all our lives – are and have been those who helped us. In a word, they were our servants, those who served our needs. So, Jesus is right. And he is right because the ones who serve are the ones who are the greatest.

Now, Jesus didn’t just say this, he demonstrated it in his life. His whole life was one of service. And he died in order to save us all, for he was truly the servant of all. he summed up his own greatness in the following words, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Jesus has to be our model if we want to be great. And we can only be great if we are prepared to serve others.