

The Entrance Antiphon for the Mass for the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time continues with the great theme of last Sunday: the Lord God is our Saviour!

“I am the salvation of the people, says the Lord.
Should they cry to me in any distress,
I will hear them, and I will be their Lord forever.”

After Peter’s confession in last Sunday’s gospel that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah, the journey of Jesus from here on to Calvary is staked out by three predictions to his disciples of his suffering and death. These predictions become increasingly explicit and yet the disciples remain intransigent in their inability to understand and accept the message of Jesus concerning his identity and mission. One may begin to wonder whether the disciples, and the Twelve in particular, are unable to understand, or is it that they don’t want to understand? Probably it is a combination of both factors. In any event, Saint Mark emphasises the disciples inability or unwillingness to understand the true nature of Jesus’ identity and mission.

They do accept that he is the Messiah (Mk. 8:29), but cling to the conventional understanding of the role: a ruler of King David’s line who would triumphantly restore the fortunes of Israel. They find it difficult to combine that understanding with Jesus’ insistence, heard again in today’s gospel, that he is to be betrayed and put to death. They seem to half know what Jesus is saying but, in an understandably human way, shrink from full knowledge of the unpalatable truth. They prefer to cling to the hopes and exciting prospects for themselves that, being close associates of the Messiah, they will reap the fruits of his ascent to power in Israel.

Because as yet they have no real mission beyond their own personal ambitions, they are becoming an insular group who find themselves descending into arguments among themselves about who should be reckoned the greatest among them. Not only do they not clearly understand the mission of Jesus as Messiah, they also misconstrue his real identity, because at this stage of their formation they have no need of him as their Saviour, beyond his utility for the achievement of their worldly ambitions:

“They came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the road?’”

They said nothing because they had presumably been arguing about which of them would have the top roles and positions of honour in the coming messianic kingdom. Nothing in fact could be more at odds with what Jesus has been attempting to communicate than such disputes about greatness. When, doubtless with some awareness of the nature of their arguments, he questions them about the subject of their argument on the road, they guiltily remain silent; they know – or at least half-know – how inappropriate such talk is.

So Jesus sits down, calls the Twelve to him and says, ‘If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all.’ In addition to his dedication to his salvific mission to “the people”, his disciples and the Twelve, Jesus demonstrates time and again in his ministry to the poor, the disabled, the sick, lepers, the possessed, tax collectors, sinners, women of ill-repute,

Samaritans, children and so on - in short those who in various ways are on the margins of "the people", of mainstream society - that he makes himself servant of ALL!

Having summoned the Twelve, Jesus then takes a little child, sets him in front of them, puts his arms around him, and says to them, 'Anyone who welcomes one of these little children in my name, welcomes me; and anyone who welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.' In the ancient world children were precious, no doubt, to their parents, but had no social status, rights or value whatsoever; until adulthood they were nobodies. For someone outside the family to 'welcome' a child in this way would be to turn prevailing values and social mores upside down; it would require putting aside all one's ideas of self-importance, and simply meeting the child as an equal, as 'child' to child.

For Jesus and his audience, the child is representative of the most neglected members of society. Jesus chooses the child to stress that ALL human beings have infinite value, being made in the image of God. All deserve the same respect, love and care, and not just those within our own insular groups or those whom we view as potential stepping stones in our own worldly advancement.

Of course the setting for such self-serving insularity and ambition can just as conveniently be the Church as the wider society. It can very easily be the Catholic parishes, schools, communities and institutions which we inhabit. It can easily be Jesus Christ and his mission who become marginalised within the Church herself!

We can do well to regularly ask ourselves as individuals and entities within the Church: Who is Jesus for us and where do we find him? Whom are we serving and why - is the scope of our mission as catholic, as wide, as the mission of Jesus?

This broadening, this catholicization of our vision need not wait for a grand stage. It can begin in any context of our daily lives. I have a Canadian friend whom I have known for forty years. He first met him when he came to Brisbane in 1981 to begin orchestrating the organisation of the entire sports program for the 1982 Commonwealth Games. As I was getting to know him, time and again in various social settings he would inevitably become aware of those who were on the margins of the group. Then in some gracious way or other, he would take the initiative to include these people in the conversation. The introduction and welcome afforded young adult "strangers" before our Sunday "Evangelium" is a simple, yet excellent local example of the same thing.

Can we begin to establish this habit of including, of gathering, really of shepherding, in ourselves in our everyday lives, and then extrapolate it to wider settings like a Catholic parish? The parish itself as a living ("juridic") person can likewise begin to find Jesus Christ in the wider society, beginning with those on the margins, since according to the famous Last Judgement scene of Chapter 25 of Matthew's gospel, "The King (Jesus Christ) will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' For many of us, this is an extraordinary statement of self-identification of Jesus with the least of his brothers and sisters, those of no account in terms of status, power and wealth in this life.

We will experience such a Catholic conversion of our own vision and motivation as truly liberating for all of us, both personally and parochially.

(This Sunday's Second Reading, James 3:16-4:3, appropriately enough approaches the same issues of personal power and ambition in the uncompromising language typical of this letter of Saint James.)