

Accepting service is Leadership

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Pentecost +22b – Mk 10.35-45 – Accepting service is leadership

Today's Gospel is a study in leadership that refuses to be co-opted or to dominate. It's also about leadership that refuses to dismiss help, however ineptly it's offered.

It begins for us with that selfish demand from James and John for box-seats beside Jesus in his glory. Their naked ambition is pretty shocking; and all the more confronting when you think what Jesus had been telling them before they buttonholed him: Jesus had taken the twelve aside and told them again what he'd said twice earlier; he predicted his death and resurrection.

The previous two times, his disciples' response must have made him wonder why on earth he'd ever picked them. The first time, Peter rebuked him. The second time, his disciples argued among themselves about which one of them was the greatest. But once again today, Jesus says his is the way of the Cross – the way of humility. And this time, two disciples respond by asking that they might be elevated to positions of the greatest imaginable privilege and power. They were filled with ambition. Could they possibly hear what Jesus would say about servant-leadership? How *could* they hear? Their minds must have been buzzing so much with their teacher's deeds of power that they just couldn't hear his words about servant leadership. They hadn't seen the cross or the empty tomb yet.

The challenge to be like Jesus, the servant leader, is central to Mark's Gospel. Mark is a short Gospel. Anything that made it into this gospel is important. If something's there three times, you can be sure that it's absolutely central. So what

do we learn from this? First of all, we learn that we can never be exposed too often to Jesus' teaching about the choice to serve, because it seems a safe bet that we won't hear what he's saying the first time, the second, or even a third time. The most important thing we see in the Gospel is Jesus's humble choice to offer his life to reveal the God of love to the world. This is his boast of God's love; his service to his fellow women and men, and walking the way of the Cross.

After the first prediction of his death and resurrection, where Peter rebuked him, Jesus taught the disciples about letting go – not clinging to life or to things for security, but trusting in God. After the second prediction, where the disciples were caught talking about which of them was most important, Jesus took a little child in his arms and taught about the importance to God of the tiniest baby.

And today, after Jesus's third prediction of his death and resurrection, when James and John ask for royal box-seats in the Kingdom, Jesus teaches that a choice to serve others is the blueprint for leadership in the community of his followers.

His path is not about being shy and sweet. It's about making choices to put God and others first. It's traditional hospitality on steroids. We're called to choose to worship God by serving others. That's our discipleship. That's how we are called to grow as Christians; and as a parish particularly. We grow by serving.

Our first priority as Christians is the worship of God; to worship God with all we are, and all we have. And Jesus showed us that the way to do that is to serve the community where God puts us. He showed us what was in his heart by serving other people to his own cost. That's our calling St John's; that's why we're here.

I realise I'm on delicate territory here. We Church-people

have often had service demanded of us in the name of our faith – particularly vulnerable, gentle church people, women and children. Some people try turn our vocation to their profit; to manipulate us into their service. So there are probably unhealed wounds about. But service that's been forced on us is not the service that Jesus lived and taught. That's abuse – it's something people do to you; and it happened to Jesus too. But people have no right to manipulate – to force others to serve them. *They* need to learn the freedom there is in serving God *themselves* by serving others.

The Christian life is *choosing* service to God. And it's *also receiving* freely-offered service; accepting others' free gifts of service. That can be hard too. We may not be offered what we want. But it doesn't mean we reject the gift. Jesus didn't sack his disciples and ask God to send him another batch just because they tried so ineptly to help him. He teaches us with love; he grows us; he disciples us.

Transformed and nurtured by his patient love, we're set free to choose to serve others to our own cost – choose; not be forced – and to acknowledge that we confront needs we can't fulfil. That humbles us. We need the help God gives us. God's help often comes from the hands of other people. Learning our limitations, accepting help, being interdependent, having our rough edges smoothed off is the beautiful discomfort of Christian community life; it's part of growing as a family.

The family we're called to belong to is often people we might not normally associate with. It can involve accepting help people offer us as their service, whether or not it's what we expect. It can mean giving what we don't expect too.

And finally, in a family, we don't get too precious about our own importance. If we've been dealt a hand of high social status, or special gifts, they are for service, not for self-importance. Servant leadership is a transforming journey of spiritual growth into Christian maturity, with all the growing

pains that brings. Amen