

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson

**Sunday 19th September 2021 - 25th Sunday in ordinary time**

Readings (Year B): 1st: Wisdom 2:12. 17-20. Psalm: 53. 2nd: James 3:16–4:3. Gospel: Mark 9:30-37.

One of the arguments that has concerned people and may or has already altered life in many different ways is working from home. In past centuries for many it was the norm, in agricultural or fishing communities it was all local, as were other trades. The industrial revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> & 19<sup>th</sup> centuries changed so much of all that, and now some work can never be done just from home.

One aspect that this change has brought that is voiced, is missing colleagues, and the chat and banter, and models of each other that are the interchange of the workplace. Of course on line, Zoom etc. has changed things too.

We all know as we are growing up we need good role models, initially from our parents and close family: then school teachers and our friends. Later as we go to higher education or into work people who lead and guide us.

As Christians our great leader is Jesus. His disciples are also examples for us too in so many ways, but today's example from the gospel might not be what we expect. Here they not only misunderstand Jesus (again) but they are afraid to ask him questions. They were arguing amongst themselves.

So Jesus turns the table and questions them. He wants them to tell him what they were arguing about. This almost sounds like a family squabble among the children where the parents has to step in and put a foot down. Perhaps like petulant children called on the carpet, the disciples remain silent. They do not have an answer for Jesus.

There can be little doubt that the detail of the row would have been at a very low level and clearly cast them all in very poor light. In a way, though, such incidents point to the utter reliability and authenticity of the Scriptures, because if the gospel writers were simply writing propaganda (as they can sometimes be accused of) they would have sought to gloss

over or cover up this kind of embarrassing weakness and failure. Instead, their insecurity and self-doubt are on show for all the world to see for all time. The disciples serve as an example for us in that despite their misunderstandings, their arguments, even their petty jealousies about who would be the greatest, they continue to follow Jesus. This clearly shows that Jesus accepts people for who they are and where they are. All he asks is to follow him.

He then teaches the Twelve about leadership and being counted as first. The leader is to be servant. This upends both ancient and certainly modern thinking about being number one. Power, riches and authority both ancient and today, are often used to amass more. But for the followers of Jesus it is to be different. For those who desire to be first, the greatest, the best, they are to be the last, the least, the servant of all.

If you want to be great, Jesus tells them, and us, become the least. Better still take on the disposition and attitude of a child. (Children and women were virtually non-citizens in those ancient cultures). This teaching is staggering, so alternative, so counter- nature let alone counter- cultural. Jesus places a child, one who had virtually no power or authority, in their midst. A child cannot return in like manner the kindness shown to it.

The relationship with a child is one where we provide for and care for the child without any expectation of return. What parent says to their child “You’ll need to pay me back for everything I spent on you while you were growing up.” We pour out our hearts for our children.

Christian discipleship is likened to that relationship. There is true freedom in humility, but it is always grounded in a true knowledge of God and self. We grow in humility to the degree that we grow in our knowledge of God’s greatness and our smallness. ‘God is great’, is the prayer of the humble.

Rather than doing favours for those who can and do repay in kind, we are invited to accept the child and all the self-giving on our part that entails. This, rather than clawing our way to the top is the true marker for Christian love and service, following Christ, our God, the Servant-King.