

Sunday, September 20, 2015

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

Conventual Mass

Christ, Christians and Servants

My parents were immigrants from Germany. My mother worked as a waitress and a cook in Germany before emigrating. After her arrival here, she continued to work as a domestic until she got married. During the depression, my father and my mother went as a live in team as cook and man servant. When I was a child we would often entertain immigrants who were still working as servants: gardeners, maids, and cooks. I loved the stories my parents would tell about their days as servants. Some were hilariously funny, some would be of irascible masters. No matter what their reaction, however, I realized that they understood that they were there to serve. In some ways this attitude colored their whole lives. I remember parties I would have for close friends. My mother would always supply a cooked meal around midnight for my friends, and my father would help her. Even though my parents knew my friends very well, they would insist on staying in the kitchen during the party and during the meal, happy to just stay there and serve. I would try to make them come out and join us, but I finally gave up, because I

realized that they were happier in their chosen role. It was not that they felt less in the presence of my friends; it was just that their chosen role made them happier. Today others have followed the Irish, German and Italian immigrants as well as African Americans to do the physical service many in our society feel is beneath them.

Our Gospel tells us that Jesus was traveling through Galilee spending time alone with his disciples in order to teach them. This time his journey would lead him to Jerusalem, to death, and to resurrection. The disciples could not grasp that their Teacher would be put to death. He was, after all, the Messiah and with that should logically come victory, fame, and honor. Their reasoning was that of the world. This was shown by the discussion they had on the road to Capernaum, a discussion, it seems, they had several times in the course of their association with Jesus. They were slow learners. They would come to full understanding only after the resurrection.

It was necessary to get them back on the right track at once. If they were to be disciples of Jesus, they would have to put on the mind of Christ. Once more Jesus turned their reasoning upside down. The reasoning of the world told them, as it tells us, that it is success, fame, power, wealth, comfort, aggression, and

aggrandizement of self that are important. Jesus would tell them that what the world teaches them leads only to impoverishment and death. It is only when we recognize our poverty, our lowliness, before God and spend ourselves in the service of others that we become truly successful and wealthy. When we possess God, or more accurately when we are totally possessed by God, we are blessed with truly unsurpassable wealth and happiness. We become like God, whose love is totally self giving, continually going outwards, continually serving us. That love was made manifest in Christ Jesus: “Though he was in the form of God, he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather, he emptied himself and took the form of a slave...obediently accepting even death, death on a cross (Phil 2, 2:6-7, 8)!” In his whole ministry, Jesus put us ahead of his own well-being. His death was a final act of selfless surrender, of ministry, of service for our sakes.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus called a child to himself. A child in that society had no rights, no privileges, and no honor. Jesus identified himself with this child. He told his disciples that his followers must conduct themselves as he did, and rejoice at being seen as lowly persons, as servants to their brothers and sisters, and to the world.

Here we can hear the echo of the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor...the reign of God is theirs; blessed are the sorrowing; they shall be consoled; Blessed are the lowly; they shall inherit the land... (Matthew 5:3-5).” This is the only road to happiness, to self-fulfillment, to peace, to the Kingdom of God.

Our second reading tells us that when we refuse to walk this road we are headed for destruction. It is in following our passions, when we make ourselves the center of the universe, that we as individuals and as community become the agents of our own and the world’s destruction. From our unredeemed hearts arise dishonesty, enmity, envy, murder, war, and all the terrors with which we have become only too familiar. It is only in following the logic of Jesus, that we, and the world in which we live, can find true happiness, peace and joy. It is then that we walk in the way of God.

At the last meal Jesus would celebrate with his disciples, none of them was willing to wash the feet of those present. That was the work of the lowliest slave. It was Jesus who stood up, picked up a towel and washed the feet of his disciples, startling them out of their complacency and selfishness. Once again, by his own example, he would teach them on the eve of his death, that the way of discipleship

must be the way of a servant, of lowliness: "...if I washed your feet—I who am Teacher and Lord—then you must wash each other's feet... as I have done, so you must do. (Jhn:13:14,15)."

With a Christ-like attitude, every work in which we find ourselves is a work of service. We are stewards only of the many gifts God entrusts to us and which God intends to be used in his service. Meeting the needs of others means being present to others in many different ways.ⁱ

Christ's teaching is not meant to be a formula for worldly success. It involves drudgery and ingratitude. We, the baptized are called to continue Christ's work of service so that Jesus can give his love to others through us. We all have opportunities to serve those around us: a mother doing her best in rearing her children properly, a home helper who puts his/her heart and soul into caring for an elderly patient, a man or woman teaching students or working in an office. The occasions are limitless. To be a disciple means being open to what God asks of us at any given moment, even in very small things like putting away the dishes or making the coffee.ⁱⁱ By putting on the mind of Christ in the service of others we become transfigured in

Christ and even in this life begin to know the peace and joy of the kingdom.

ⁱ Desmond Knowles, *Voicing a thought on Sunday* (Dublin, Columba Press, 1997) 234

ⁱⁱ Desmond Knowles,, 234-235