

Deacon Tony's Homily for the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Commentary on Isaiah 53:10-11; Hebrews 4:14-16; Mark 10:35-45

OFTEN, IT IS SAID, when looking for a job it is not what you know but whom you know that counts most. In China, people often speak of guanxi, "connections" with people in the right places.

Today we see two brothers, who belong to the innermost circle of Jesus' disciples, trying to exert their guanxi.

Their opening gambit seems a quite modest request: "Master, we want you to do something for us." As a question it is an opening for which we probably have fallen many times: "Could you do something for me?" Jesus is not so easily duped. He counters with another question: "What do you want me to do for you?" We should remember this question because it is going to come up again in next Sunday's Mass.

But it is also a question we should hear Jesus asking us now. Let us give the answer today and see whether we might change it in the light of next Sunday's Gospel. Our answer to the question should be very fundamental. In other words, it should go to the very root of what we want out of life.

If we just say things like money or winning a lottery, having good health, getting a good job, being successful or whatever... we will still have to say 'Why?' or 'What for?' I am asking for these things. In life, what do I really want? Happiness, security, peace... or something else?

Are you really with me?

How did the two brothers answer the question? They had heard Jesus speaking of suffering, death and new life. They had recognized Jesus as the Messiah-King of Israel and heard him refer often to "his kingdom". So they boldly asked, "Give us the two top places in your kingdom." As Mark comments: their request showed they had no understanding whatever of what Jesus had told them.

"Can you drink the cup I am going to drink? Can you be baptized with the baptism with which I will be baptized?" Jesus asks them. Jesus here was speaking of his passion and death. "No problem!" they glibly answered.

No understanding

It is clear they had no understanding of how this King would triumph by emptying himself to the lowest human level and only then enter his kingdom. This is what Isaiah speaks about in today's First Reading. He speaks of God crushing the Suffering Servant (Jesus) with suffering as the way for him to have many heirs and live a long life. "By his sufferings shall my servant justify many."

That is the way they would have to go. They would have to drink the cup to its bitter dregs and be baptized, immersed, submerged in the total self-giving of their Master. And indeed, as Jesus said, they would do this. James would be one of the young Church's earliest martyrs. They would sit with Jesus in glory. But they would do this by going with him all the way and not by any guanxi or back-door deals.

Leading by service

Understandably, when the other 10 heard about this, they were very angry. It was not because they disagreed but because they felt cheated. These two had gone behind their backs and pulled a fast one. Their understanding of Jesus was not one whit better.

So now Jesus brings them all together and tells them his view of greatness and success in life. There is only one way to greatness and it is his way. It does not consist of sitting on thrones, living in fine houses, driving luxury cars, belonging to exclusive clubs, eating in fine restaurants, having holidays in exotic places... the things our glossy Sunday supplements portray every week.

Greatness consists not in what we have, or in what we can get from others but in what we can give of ourselves to others. The Second Reading from the letter to the Hebrews tells us today that in Jesus we have a "great" high priest. When is Jesus our great high priest? When he is in a temple built with exotic marble and wearing vestments made of costly cloth and precious stones and people bowing down before him? No, he is our great high priest when he, the priest and victim, hangs stark naked on the altar of the cross while the crowds mock and jeer below.

In our own time, I suppose Mother Teresa is an outstanding example. Why did she get a state funeral? Surely it was in recognition of her greatness and also something she had never dreamt of or wanted. Her greatness was in the giving of her whole self to the very lowest, treating them as brothers and sisters.

We need to remember she was doing this long before Malcolm Muggeridge made his TV program about her and made her famous. Her greatness was not in her fame or even in her reputation for holiness but because of her spirit of service to those most neglected and in need.

Mother Teresa was a great missionary bringing the Gospel message of service to the very poorest. She was not only an Albanian who became a missionary in India. She and her sisters went on missionary work to New York and Los Angeles, to London and even Rome. A missionary in Rome?! Yes, there too. Missionary work goes in all directions today.

Like James and John and the other disciples, like Mother Teresa and many others, we are ALL called to be missionaries, most of us right where we are. To be good missionaries we have to hear Jesus' words about where real greatness lies. It is a message that is not always easy to hear in a society like ours.

We are all called to be not only disciples and followers but also apostles and missionaries. We cannot live our Christian faith fully unless we are sharing it and witnessing to it in our daily lives.