

**Feast of St James, Apostle and Martyr, 25<sup>th</sup> July, 2010**  
**Matthew 20:20-28**  
**The First Must Be Last**

*“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mat 20:25b-28)*

It's probable that you wouldn't get many jobs as a management consultant if Jesus' words were the basis of your management philosophy. People would buy the bit about not being a tyrant, but leadership based on being a servant to all? Not consultative leadership, not collaborative, not strategically getting down on the worker's level; but servant, slave, costly to self. If power and mastery was part of the company's image to be projected, it just wouldn't fit. No thoughts of this leadership being politically or commercially productive, either. If you came across with the servant message in your interview for promotion, you mightn't get many ticks. Such is the way of our world.

These words of Jesus' are familiar -he's sorting out the argument between the brothers, James and John, who want preferential treatment, and the other disciples who are peeved at them. In this part of the Gospel of Luke, being the last and least has been Jesus' theme. He's come at it from several directions, trying hard to get it through to his disciples what his kingdom is all about. It's a hard slog - the disciples are so caught up in the patronage culture of the time, where having a higher status patron could mean a better life. Common village people were always on the look-out for someone whom they could piggy back on to greater status. Being seated high at the table next to the dominant person of a community was something to be greatly aspired to - that's what's underlying James and his brother's aspirations in this story; and that's what accounts for the other disciples' anger -the brothers trying to get one better over them..

Jesus' kingdom is the reverse of what is valued in the world. He's told his disciples that the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as the little children who gather around him; he's said that those who leave everything for him will inherit eternal life, and that the last will be first; his parable about the hired labourers underline that in his kingdom those who come in last will be treated the same as the first-comers. And he's very clearly described that his own ending- betrayal, flogging, crucifixion - will not fit any image of a great warrior. That being great is costly. And still the disciples don't get it.

And the question, as always with this text is: do we get it? Do we get the fundamental values of Christ's kingdom? Do we get what Jesus' life -and death - was about? Not the kingdom of the hereafter; but life here and now of being Christ's own. He's talking about values that he expects his followers in every age to ascribe to. And it's counter-cultural -it goes against what the society values; and it's counter-intuitive -it doesn't make sense. Because it doesn't put success first; and because it's costly to us.

Our world mightn't be built on the patronage systems of the first century Mediterranean world, but the same attitudes still hang around. There's still the same human elements of the need to be someone; to be significant, to make our life count for something. Even to be better than others in all sorts of ways. We tend to translate that into being seen as being successful in whatever terms success is measured by. Today that's things like promotions at work, being recognised and applauded by the managing director, winning Masterchef or Dancing with the Stars, achieving, coming first in class, in sport or wherever; and it's acquiring *things*, like big houses, big cars, private school education, big toys (kid's and grown-up's), etc, etc.

And what Jesus is telling us even today, is that his life is about something other than that sort of achievement. That's not what being his disciples, his followers, his Church is about. What Jesus is telling us is that for our lives to be of worth, for our identities to be secure, for significance, happiness and peace - we don't have to strive for that sort of success, wealth and recognition. It's not the world's values that count -it's Christ's life and Christ's values. The first must be last and be servants of all. And for our deep-down feelings of acceptance and security - to have God's love, we don't have to earn it.

A couple of stories to illustrate.

This week I was in Perth for the ordination of a good friend. Two things in the ordination service I noticed that are not done in our Melbourne ordinations. The Archbishop -Roger Herft - knelt before each of the ordinands and washed their feet -slowly, meticulously, lovingly; washing their feet, drying them, and then kissing them. In the way of Christ, he - their Archbishop - was demonstrating that he was their servant.

A little later, during the singing of the ancient chant, *Veni Creator Spiritus*, the candidates all completely prostrated themselves - that is, they lay down fully on the chancel floor in a complete cruciform prostration, flat to the floor and arms spread wide, the nose and forehead pressed into the floor. This is a very ancient expression of humility, symbolic of the attitude with which the ordained are to approach the whole of their work and life. Their lives in complete submission to Christ.

A third part of this service which also struck me -powerfully - was at the giving of the holy Communion. The very last person to receive communion - that is after the whole Cathedral full of people had received communion - was the Archbishop. And receiving communion just before him were the new deacons, and the Diocesan Bishops and other dignitaries of the Church. I gather that's how the Archbishop always does it when he presides at the Eucharist -he will always be the last. That spoke volumes to me; because I've noticed that even in the church, there's a pecking order and power plays, sometimes subtle, sometimes overt. At communion, it's very rare for the Presider and the "Important People" to be communicated last. Since coming here to this parish, I've made it my practice to take communion last during

Lent, but don't be surprised to see this becoming my weekly practice. If the leaders of the Church can demonstrate and model a practice of servant leadership, seen at the very heart of the Eucharist, then we all might start to get what Jesus is on about.

Lest we romanticise these symbolic gestures, let's remind ourselves first that this servanthood is costly. And let's also remind ourselves that being servant to all is not just for priests -it's for the whole priesthood of Christ's believers- for all of us. For those newly ordained deacons, they will discover the cost of giving up their lives to serve others -I don't just mean financially or anything like that. What they've laid down and given to God and his Church are their desires to construct their lives as **they** would. And this is the crunch: this is the call for all who would follow Christ. As he laid down his life for us, we also are called to be servants and give our lives, let go. Our lives are to be placed in God's hands, so that we might follow him. Completely. At whatever cost.

St James, our saint of today who wanted the glory without realising the cost, did end up "drinking the cup" of Jesus, following his way to the end: on the orders of Herod, who was persecuting the Church, he was killed with the sword.

Think about what that cost of following Jesus Christ may be for you - could it be that you lose esteem in the world's eyes; wealth or financial security; ambition; success; recognition and applause? If none of these, think about what it means to give over the control of your life to God. What would change?

To finish: As you go about your life this week, what gestures or actions can you make, that symbolically or actually, model that servitude of Christ's?