

## THE UNCOMFORTABLE PARADOX

*“If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9: 35)*

**Jesus Reveals His Person and Mission:** It is in human nature to avoid crosses and suffering, and everything that brings pains. But this is not so with the Christian life. This is the hallmark of today’s message. For the second consecutive Sunday, Jesus speaks of His rejection and suffering, with the intent of revealing the mystery of His Person and mission to His disciples and what it implies to us all. On this occasion, the inattentiveness or indifference or ignorance of the disciples prompts Jesus to expound on three of the deep-rooted weaknesses of human nature – the craving for power, possession, and pleasure; and how they must be replaced through the Gospel lifestyle of selfless service, humility, and childlike simplicity.

**Opposed But Not Deterred:** The Church invites us to see the First Reading (Wisdom 2: 12, 17-20) as a prophecy of the Lord’s Passion. We hear the godless, represented in the Gospel by the scribes, the Pharisees and the chief priests, plot against the “Just One”, Jesus. They complain that He has challenged their authority, reproached them for breaking the law of Moses and for betraying their upbringing and training as leaders of the people. We hear the chilling words that foreshadow how they will hand Him over, scorch Him, torture Him, condemn Him to a shameful death and mock Him as he hangs on the cross. The Psalmist captures the inner state of the “Just One”, Who remained unfazed by these threats and tortures, and with an inexplicable generosity, He sacrifices with a willing heart trusting that God will uphold his life and save Him. To this day, the Christian who makes efforts to live a virtuous life faces these threats since his ways are not the ways of the world. Like Christ, the “Just One”, we must trust in God and remain unfazed and undeterred.

**The Son of Man Must Die:** The Gospel (Mk. 9: 30-37) continues with the theme of the Suffering Servant of God that we heard last week. Notice here Jesus does not want anyone to know their whereabouts. Mark points this out to emphasise the importance of this instruction, which was core to understanding the life and mission of the Messiah. If the apostles would carry on with the mission of Christ, they must understand, accept, and imbibe this novel notion of the Messiah that Jesus articulates. “The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men; they will put Him to death, and three days after He has been put to death He will rise again.” The expression “delivered into” or “handed over” captures the whole process of Jesus’ Passion: He was handed over to the chief priests by Judas, one of His apostles; the chief priests handed Him over to Pilate, who handed Him over to be crucified. But Jesus was not a helpless victim of forces beyond Him, rather He delivered Himself or handed over Himself in utter obedience to the Will of His Father to save us all. His death was His choice in obedience for our good. This was His mission, and nothing could stop Him.

***The Great Indifference:*** For the second time, Jesus revealed His mission to the disciples, and twice they failed to understand Him. This time, the lack of understanding lures them to indifference. For although they did not understand what Jesus meant by all these; and refusing to seek clarifications, they resorted to issues that reveal the deep-seated human weakness for power, possession, and pleasure. For, they were arguing which of them was the greatest. Here they were victims of wrong notions of the Messiah; and are trapped in the web of vain human desires. What a time for this ugliness of human nature to raise its head. St James cautions in the Second Reading (James 3: 16-4: 3) that this innate desire for competition and ambition is the source of jealousy, wars, conflict, and disunity among us. When they got home, Jesus asked: “What were you arguing about on the road?” They were silent. The kind of silence that overwhelms you when caught in the act of inappropriate behaviour. The disciples felt it was fair to argue about this if they thought Jesus was not listening, but when presented before Jesus, it became naked in all its unworthiness. Jesus is the Truth, before Whom there are no inuendoes and metaphors – everything lies open before Him. How often do we forget the closeness and the omniscience of Jesus and act like the disciples, not knowing that everything lies open to Him?

***The Uncomfortable Paradox:*** The contention of the disciple’s argument was opposed to the life that Jesus expected of them, the lifestyle required to accomplish the mission ahead. And so, He sat down and began to teach them: “If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last and servant of all.” The principles enunciated by Jesus here upholds that to be first, one must aspire to be last; to be a master, one must seek to be a servant of all. It follows from His teaching last Sunday: he who saves his life will lose it; he who loses his life for the sake of the Gospel will save it. Unless a grain of wheat dies, it bears no fruits. It is in dying that we are born to eternal life. St Paul puts this in these words: “Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves” (Phil. 2: 2-3). This is the Christian paradox that the world does not understand, and many Christians find it hard to live out. William Shakespeare articulates this in Julius Caesar: “What touches us first must be last served.” The leader is called to be the servant of his people, who thinks, speaks, and takes actions based on what is best for the people and not for himself. Humility and meekness are virtues that enable the leader to see his office as a position of grace; makes her available to all; patient with others: attentive, sensitive, and responsive to the needs of those placed under his care. These qualities produce empathetic and transformational leadership, which inspire and empower.

***The Child Analogy:*** Jesus’ lesson on servant-leadership follows an illustration: “He then took a little child, set him in front of them, put His arms around him, and said to them: ‘Anyone who welcomes any of these little ones in My name, welcomes Me; and anyone who welcomes me, welcomes not Me but the One Who sent Me’” (Mark 9: 36-37). Why a little child? In ancient Palestine, and the ancient world (and could also be said of our modern world), children were powerless, considered the weakest. They had nothing to

offer, and they were abused and forced into slavery. It is not a surprise that Jesus would identify Himself with a child because He came to save the weak, fallen humanity. In Matthew 25: 40, there is a similar identification when He said: "When you did it for one of the least of your brothers, you did it for Me." But here, Jesus goes beyond Himself to God, the Father. The commission to welcome these little ones is to let the disciples, and indeed all of us, know that the new Kingdom would be an all-inclusive one. A kingdom, where everyone is firstborn son, created in the image and likeness of God united in one faith and one baptism in the one Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the New Kingdom, the disciples, and indeed all the members of Kingdom, are to warm up to the weakest; to receive those who have nothing to offer; to respect the dignity of every human being irrespective of status, and to serve "the least" of the Lord's brothers/sisters. We may need to examine our relationships with "the child" in our society today: how do we relate with the weak and the powerless? How do we receive those who have nothing to offer? Where are the underprivileged in our considerations?

***My dear friends***, the Word of God invites us to a life of selfless service in imitation of our Lord. It challenges us to a life of humility and service; of simplicity and sacrifice, just like our Lord and Master Jesus led. It calls us to realise that as leaders, we are first and foremost servants, called to consider and attend to the needs of those under our care before ourselves. Every personal, political, social, economic, and religious problem of our world today would have been resolved and solved if every man lived for what they could do for others and not for what we could gain for ourselves. May the Lord grant us the grace to be humble in our various steads.