

29TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, B
THE ESSENCE OF LEADERSHIP

*“Allow us to sit one at Your right hand and the other at your left in Your glory.”
(Mark 10: 37)*

Is God Cruel? Have you ever been tempted to think God cruel? Have you ever asked the-why-me question? The opening verse of the First Reading from Isaiah (53: 10-11) kind of buttresses your queries as it seemingly presents God as cruel: “The Father had been pleased to crush His servant with suffering.” Another translation renders this verse thus: “It was the will of the Father to crush Him.” Was the Father happy to crush His Son? Why would He crush anyone, much less His Son? This raises or leads us to the question of the mystery of redemptive suffering. The pericope of our Reading is one of the Songs of the Suffering Servant of God foreseen by Isaiah. The Messiah is the Suffering Servant of God, is the Incarnate Word, who becomes both priest and victim by offering His own life in atonement for the sin. Truly, it was the will of the Father that the Messiah should suffer. But there was no force or coercion in any form. The Servant freely chose to accept the suffering. There is a union between the will of the Father and the freedom of the Servant for the greater good. First, it was an atonement for our sins, through which “He shall see His heirs, he shall have a long life, and through Him, what the Lord wishes will be done.” God does not will suffering for its own sake, neither does He take pleasure in human suffering. Every suffering is for a greater good that may come from it. “By His suffering shall My Servant justify many, taking their fault on Himself.” Therefore, God is not cruel. In our times of suffering God is right beside us to comfort us in all our distress and give us the grace of perseverance to go through the pains so we can enjoy the benefits of our endurance. The Second Reading from Hebrews (4: 14-16) adduces further reason the Servant of God had to suffer. So that having been so tempted in every way like us, though without sin, He can understand our weaknesses and sympathise with us. God knows what we undergo because he experienced it. For this reason, we can confidently approach the throne of grace to receive forgiveness and experience His loving mercy.

The Importunate Question: The Gospel presents a narrative that reveals the apostles’ impervious attitude to the teaching of Jesus about His Kingdom. Thrice Jesus had spoken to them that leadership in the new Kingdom must be conceived via service, greatness through smallness, and life by dying. The disciples were still not at home with this novel teaching. How hard it is for man to learn something new when he has fixed his mind on what he perceives as the truth. The understanding of the message of the kingdom always requires humility and openness to learning and accepting something new. Here, James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, stuck to their preferred notions of the kingdom, and approached Jesus for a favour: “Allow us to sit one at Your right hand and the other on Your left in Your glory.” They did not know what they were asking. Do not sometimes act like this too? Do we always understand what we ask? Do we allow our human desires and concepts to define our requests? Why do we request the things we do?

The Significance of the Cup and Baptism: Jesus used this opportunity to teach one more time what their request meant, namely to “drink the cup that I must drink and be baptised in the baptism that I must be baptised.” Without understanding, they glibly replied: “We can.” What were the “cup” and “baptism” that Jesus referred to here? For the Jews, “the cup” was a symbol of God’s judgement – blessings for the righteous (Ps. 16: 5; 23: 5; 116: 13); or wrath for the sinful (Ps. 75: 9; Isa. 51: 17-22; Jer. 49: 12; Ezek. 23: 31-34). The “baptism” referred to Jesus’ immersion into the suffering of humanity through his passion and death. Thus, Jesus was inviting His disciples to share in the mystery of His suffering, passion, and death. Jesus Himself would go on to “drink this cup” as He endured the passion and be immersed in the “baptism” of His blood on the Cross. History has it that James was the first apostle to die, after Stephen. He was killed with the sword by King Herod Agrippa I of Judea (Acts 12: 1-2). Thus, Jesus’ words certainly came to pass in the life of James and probably in the life of John as there is no consensus about how John died, except that he was the last of the twelve to die.

The Essence of Leadership: The request of James and John was met with indignation by the other disciples. This reaction exposed both their lack of understanding and their selfish desire for power, prestige, and privileges of authority. Jesus seized the opportunity to remind them what true discipleship is about – that it is about being different in all things. Leadership, for Jesus, is about being in the world and not being of the world (John 17: 14-19); it is about service, not power; it is about the cross, not the crown; about washing the feet of others, not sitting on the throne; it is about being the last not the first; about being a little child, not being the lord. To be a disciple of Jesus, one must be ready to turn the standards of the world on its head, not acting like the Gentiles, who lord it over, but acting like Christ, who came to serve not to be served. This is the hallmark of leadership in the Church and society. A leader, wherever he may be, is first and foremost, a servant, entrusted with the responsibility of the care of the people and accountable to God ultimately. Leadership is defined by Christ with the example of His life: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.” This servant-leadership model does not sit well even with 21st-century leaders. Our world today is still a victim of this depraved notion of leadership. Today’s leaders think first of privileges and benefits, of abuse of power for intimidation and manipulation, of self-aggrandisement and promotion of ills to satisfy their whims. They lord it over instead of serving the ones entrusted to them. What kind of leaders are we? Which model do we prefer and adopt? W

My dear friends, sometimes we too can be selfish and inconsiderate in our aspirations and desires like James and John. Many times, we strive after power and influence as though they were the only necessary ideals worth pursuing. Have we ever asked ourselves why and for what purpose we seek power? Is it to serve or to dominate? To uplift or to suppress, to empower or to deprive, to transform or to deform? There are times when the cross becomes very heavy, and the sacrifice becomes almost unbearable. There are times when the darkness seems encompassing, and we find it very difficult to understand what it means to be a disciple and to follow Jesus. At such times we pray, Lord, open the minds

of our hearts to understand what your call holds for us and the grace to keep holding on and persevering in our struggle to love You and serve You in our neighbours, especially in those placed under us. Amen.