29 B 2024

 On the long road to Jerusalem Jesus, with little success, had intended to convey to the disciples some sense of the fate that awaits Him in Jerusalem. Three times He has made clear His destiny to suffer and die. The disciples, who now understand that Jesus is the Messiah, simply cannot hold together these two truths: that Jesus is the Messiah, and that He is going to discharge His messianic role through this way of suffering and death. The disciples still cling to the idea that the Messiah will be a righteous, triumphant ruler who will restore the glories of the past.

 This understanding of the role of messiahship lies behind the request of these two brothers, James and John, in today’s Gospel. Their bid for places on His right and His left signals ambition to be the Lord’s favored disciples at the celebratory banquet of the messianic kingdom. They have not internalized anything of what Jesus has been saying: that the path to any glory leads through suffering and death.

 Jesus as Lord and Teacher uses biblical imagery to hint at what lies in store. “Baptism” does not refer to sacrament. It evokes a biblical metaphor in which going through trials is depicted as a passage through stormy, turbulent waters. “Cup” is a biblical metaphor for the fate that lies ahead of a person what he or she will receive from the hand of God. Without realizing what James and John are letting themselves in for, they express their readiness to share Jesus’ “cup.” Jesus accepts their response and affirms its eventual its eventual realization.

But the assignment of places in Jesus’ kingdom belongs not to Himself but to the Father. Jesus’ explanation shows that Jesus Himself is not going to His death in a kind of calculating way: that His suffering and death will be terrible, and will have a happy ending in resurrection. No. Jesus is surrendering His future entirely into the hands of the Father in whose power and generosity Jesus places complete trust. We who wish to follow and imitate Him by our Franciscan profession must accompany Him in this trust as well.

 Jesus turns His attention to the understandable irritation of the remaining disciples at what they see as an attempt of James and John to “bag” the highest places in the kingdom. Jesus provides an opportunity to explain the absolute connection between the exercise of leadership and the exercise of authority which, in a worldly sense, is what the disciples have in mind. Those who have authority on earth use their power to turn everything to their own advantage. On the contrary, those who aspire to leadership in the community, in the kingdom, in the fraternity must think of themselves as the servants of all—a complete reversal of values.

 Jesus drives the point home: “the Son of Man has come, not to *be* served, but to *serve* and give His life as a ransom for many.” The words “for many” echoes the Fourth Suffering Servant Song (our first reading). His messianic role is not about the worldly sense of expectation, but in a sense specified by the role spelled out in the “Servant” figure: one who enters into the pain and suffering of the world, who bears the sins of “the many,” in order to ransom all people and bring about freedom and life. This is the ultimate depth of the “service” that Jesus performs as Messiah, for the entire world.

 St Paul complements this sense of Jesus’ service. In our own suffering and difficulties, we should draw confidence from the fact that Jesus, having Himself experienced suffering and weakness, is a compassionate advocate before “the throne of grace.” Today’s Scripture readings confront us, as a challenge, to the exercise of power and authority. We worship and imitate Jesus as Lord. Let us worship and imitate Him in His role as Servant of all.

Henri Nouwen’s reflection on Christian leadership, found on page 9 of the Franciscan Servant Leadership Handbook, writes: “the question is not how many people take us seriously? How much are we going to accomplish? Can we show some results? But, are we in love with Jesus?...to know the heart of God, a heart that forgives, that cares, that reaches out and wants to heal, to know the heart of God as it has become flesh, ‘a heart of flesh’ in Jesus.”

 Let the prayer of St Teresa of Avila be yours: “Christ has no body now but mine. He prays in me, works in me, looks through my eyes, speaks through my words, works through my hands, walks with my feet and loves with me here.”