

Sunday Homily

TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

17 OCTOBER 2021

YEAR B

“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.”

Mark 10:45

Illustration

Philip Pullman’s trilogy *His Dark Materials* tells the story of Lyra, a girl with an important destiny. As the story of Lyra and her adventures unfolds, as she journeys to worlds other than her own, meets witches, angels and talking bears, finds out the identity of her parents, and travels in the world of the dead, we gradually discover what that destiny is. Lyra is the new Eve, the one who will re-enact the fall of humanity, lose her innocence, and bring the world to new consciousness and understanding. The ultimate task of Lyra and her friends is to overthrow the Ancient of Days, the authority in heaven; to abolish the kingdom of heaven and replace it with a republic, in which human beings will decide their own destiny, free of divine intervention and church interference. In some ways the books are anti-Christian. Philip Pullman is certainly opposed to the structures of the institutional Church, and has no love for Christianity. But in another way, the truths about which he writes are profoundly Christian, as today’s Gospel reading shows.

Gospel Teaching

In the Gospel reading Jesus and his disciples discuss the nature of power in the Christian community that is to be. James and John want to make sure of their places, but incur the wrath of the other disciples for getting above themselves. The argument provides Jesus with an opportunity to talk about relationships among his followers. The author of the Gospel knows that Jesus is addressing those who, in the author’s own time, are the leaders of the new Christian Church. They have come from humble backgrounds, from a subject people, into a position of authority. One might expect them to enjoy finally having some power, with the best intentions of exercising it for good. They have travelled with Jesus, endured hardships, worked at understanding his mission; they have earned their position of leadership and intend to use it well. But Jesus will not allow it.

What Jesus does is to redefine the nature of power relationships within the community. The Christian Church is not to behave as if it were any other organisation, he insists. Christian leaders are not to lord it over other members of the Church. On the contrary, those who are in a position of leadership must set an example of humble service. They must even, in effect, be slaves to other members of the community. They must do this in order to follow the example

of their one true leader, Jesus himself, who, the Gospel says, “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many”.

The whole of Jesus’ life, ministry and death was an expression of submission, of service to the human race. He modelled a new kind of leadership. His kingship is one gained through the ultimate act of service, his death on the cross. If his followers are to be true to him, they must adopt the same patterns of leadership and relationships. The Christian community is to be a community of mutual service and love.

Application

There is perhaps no other teaching of Jesus that has been harder for the Church to follow. We human beings find it hard to live without structures and hierarchies. We enjoy our own importance. We like to be honoured by others. We work hard for recognition, and enjoy receiving our due reward.

And Christians are not immune to these natural human instincts. Very soon after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the Church had developed structures of leadership and ministry – and perhaps it could not have survived without them. If we think about it, we can see that an attitude of service modelled on that of Jesus would transform all our relationships, from international politics to family life. Only God can bring about that transformation; but that does not excuse us from trying to follow Jesus’ example in our local churches and in our personal lives. How many of those quarrels between church members could be avoided if everyone adopted an attitude of mutuality and service?

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. As we try to build the kingdom of heaven in our place and time, may it rather be a republic of heaven, in which all are equal and all both serve and are served.