

At a funeral Mass not long ago, a visitor approached me and commented on how nice our “new” church was. I began to correct him to tell him that the building was not new but 50 years old when he continued saying that his church in Canoñcito was “old”. Indeed, Nuestra Senora de Luz in Canoñcito was built in the 1880s, over 127 years ago. Immaculate Heart of Mary’s current building was completed in 1968, just 50 years ago, not so “old”. Our church building was dedicated on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1968, and so today we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of our “new” church.

On this occasion it is worth reflecting on the meaning of Church. We all know that when we talk about Church we mean more than a building. It is more than a place we go to worship and it is more than just a collection of beliefs. 2000 years ago Jesus founded his Church on Peter and the Apostles. Then there was no church building in which to gather and no documented collection of beliefs, those would come later. Jesus’ Church was the communion of believers who had a relationship with the Son of God in fellowship with each other. That is as true today as it was then, although today we also have church buildings and well articulated beliefs founded on Jesus’ teachings. But the core meaning of Church remains the same, a relationship with Jesus and one another, carrying out his mission.

In our Gospel today we witness one of the episodes in the formation of Christ’s Church. Jesus is nearing the end of his ministry and is on his way to Jerusalem and to his Passion. He

has just given his third prediction of his suffering and death. His disciples have been with him for almost three years now, listening to his teaching and witnessing his miracles. But strangely, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, ask Jesus for something that reveals that they haven't really understood what Jesus had been teaching them. In fact they show that they are totally clueless in regard to Jesus' fundamental purpose.

James and John were among Jesus' closest friends. They were two of the three in the "inner circle" as it were, Peter being the third. These three were invited to exclusively witness three important events in Jesus' ministry: the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead, the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain, and Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. You might think that with that association they would have understood Jesus' teaching and not been ignorant of his mission. But apparently that is not the case.

Thomas Aquinas sheds some light on their mistaken understanding. He describes four desires that are substitutes for God in our life. They are wealth, pleasure, power, and honor. These things are not wholly bad in themselves, it is when they become the dominate motivation for our actions that they become a problem. James and John were seeking two of these in their request, power and honor.

Jesus takes their misguided request and uses it to continue their education. In relating how the rulers of the Gentiles use their position to dominate their people, Jesus said "*it shall not be so*

*among you*". It is humility that must be their rule of life, a humility that leads to service, not only to their followers but to each other.

*"Whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all."*

Greatness does not come from power and honor but from humble service. Jesus will later demonstrate this attitude when, at the last supper, he washes the feet of his disciples, a truly humble act for God Incarnate to wash the dirty feet of his followers.

*"For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

Even Jesus' response to their request is a teaching moment. *"Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"* Baptism was a rite of purification even in the Jewish community before the time of Christ. Jesus, in referring to his Passion as a *"baptism"*, is showing that his suffering and death will be a purification on behalf of the whole world. And he conceals the true question *"are you prepared to spill your blood also"* in the question *"can you drink the cup?"*. The expression *"to drink the cup"* is used in the Old Testament to refer to accepting one's destiny. Jesus' destiny is to drink the cup of suffering, a suffering that will lead to our salvation. He is asking James and John if they too are willing to suffer and die for the salvation of others. The sons of Zebedee agree they can but I don't think they fully understood what they were agreeing to.

James indeed did drink the cup of suffering and became the first Apostle to be martyred, being put to death by the sword by King Herod Agrippa in 44 A.D. He is the only one of the Twelve whose death is recorded in Scripture (Acts 12:1-2), although we know from other sources that ten of the remaining eleven were also martyred for their faith.

One lesson here is to be careful what you ask for. I'm sure James had no idea that his request to sit at Jesus right or left in the kingdom would lead to his martyrdom, if he had, he probably would not have asked.

So what should we, as a communion of believers in relationship with Jesus, take away from this episode?

As a deacon, I learned early on that the defining attribute of the office is the call to serve. The office of deacon was born out of the need of the Apostles to have help in serving their followers, freeing them to focus on teaching and preaching the Gospel. But the call to service is not reserved for clergy alone. In today's Gospel Jesus explicitly says if we want to be part of his Church we must be willing to serve each other, and he models that service through his loving sacrifice for us. We are **all** called to serve through self-sacrificial love.

The challenge for us is to discover how Jesus calls each of us individually to that service. Each of us has different opportunities to serve others in our lives, in our families, at work or in other daily activities. I think it is fairly easy to imagine how to express self-sacrificial love in our families. Parents particularly

have numerous opportunities to lovingly sacrifice for their children. And all families have those challenging members who are hard to love, they present us with real opportunities for self-sacrificial love.

It may be more difficult to see opportunities to practice self-sacrificial love in the work place. This is compounded by the fact that those four substitutes for God that Thomas Aquinas described are alive and well in our desire to succeed in our careers. The quest for wealth, power, honor, and even pleasure are more likely to become the driving force in our behaviors in the work place than the teachings of Jesus. The challenge is to step away from these motivations long enough to see opportunities to serve others as Jesus says we must. Helping a colleague succeed over grabbing an opportunity to show your own expertise, taking time away from your own endeavors to help a team succeed, or letting go of your “better” idea to let someone else grow in their career, these may all be ways to respond to Jesus’ call to serve. It all comes down to letting go of those substitutes for God and letting God direct our lives.

Just think how different our country would be if our leaders were focused on service instead of wealth, pleasure, power, and honor. We wouldn’t be watching the divisiveness we see in politics these days, social problems would be handled effectively and differences would become an asset instead a source of animosity .

Our challenge as Church, that is followers of Christ in

fellowship with each other, is to live a life of service to our fellowman in such a way as to be a catalyst for change in our society, to demonstrate self-sacrificial love in the style of Jesus, to model that style of living to those around us, especially our children. If we could do that, then maybe we, and those who learn from us, may not make the same mistake that James and John did in seeking honor for themselves.

*“The Son of Man came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* So we too are called to serve and give our lives in love to others.