



JESUIT
INSTITUTE
SOUTH
AFRICA

Homily

29th Sunday Ordinary Time – Year B

Ricardo da Silva SJ

Be bold! Knock and the door will be opened. Ask, and it shall be given unto you. In all my years, I don't think I've ever realized quite how arrogant the disciples are. And, I've certainly failed to recognize their brazenness with their teacher: Jesus. Their self-serving entitlement has just never been so plain to me.

"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." What a cheek! How dare they speak to Jesus like that! But, I suppose, it may not be too far from what we do in our prayers all the time: make demands of God tailored precisely to our liking. It is also advice I often give to people who ask my counsel: Be bold! Tell God exactly what you want or need from God.

So, what's, really, the difference between my advice and the brazen demand James and John, the sons of Zebedee, make of Jesus today?

I suppose, on the one hand, I'd like to think the requests we make of Jesus, in our prayer, or not quite as demanding or direct. But, if I'm honest, they probably are, which is why, perhaps, their ask of Jesus provoke such a strong reaction in me. My phrasing may not be quite as sharp when addressing the Lord, but my intention is probably no different. We all want things our way, if at all possible.

And maybe, Jesus was no different.

Take the words he speaks in his agony at the Garden of Gethsemane: "Father, if this cup can pass me by?" Even knowing the cup couldn't pass him by, Jesus begs for a different outcome from his heavenly father.

And in our society and our church, it is no different. If we can control the outcome at all, we will. The difference, perhaps, for us is that we will do it at all costs. And often to save ourselves and preserve things to our liking, which is exactly what the brothers, James and John, sought to do. "Give us a place next to you", "Choose us as your favourites", "Let us share power, pleasure, honour with you."

And, it is clear given the rage expressed among the Twelve, they, too, wanted preferential treatment: to be picked by God. They wanted Jesus to express a preference among the Twelve, ranking them in importance. It was also a familiar worldview for them, based on Scripture. Their sense was of a Messianic banquet, where, as on the earth, at the end of days, in the heavens, the priest-Messiah would be seated at the head of the table and to his left and right, people would be seated in order of importance: Kings, Lords, servants, servants of servants. The expectation was the Jesus was not unlike an earthly ruler and played by the same rules that governed life in society, where social rank determined status and power in society.

The disciples just didn't get it: They wanted to be sure that there was something in it for them. At first, as we saw weeks ago, the discussion was over who was the greatest among them on earth. Now, the discussion has evolved somewhat; it's as if they were hedging their bets, doing a cost-benefit analysis. Okay, so if I agree to become a servant on earth, then can I at least be the greatest in heaven? Would my eternal reward be greater if I sacrifice earthly riches and privileges? They didn't understand that the model of leadership was one of servanthood, whether on earth or in heaven that required suffering and total submission of their own wills.

And isn't this a calculation we still experience in our church today? We constantly hear our faith framed in terms of heavenly reward, speaking of sacrifice on earth to gain compensation in the afterlife, forgetting that the price for our salvation, our eternal reward, has already been purchased by Jesus' blood. The Son of Man who, as our Gospel reminds us today, "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many—a slave for all."

It was as difficult for the disciples as it is for us to believe what Jesus came to teach. And, for years, those in power in the church have, for the most part, thought the same.

The church is a hierarchy and therefore, there is an order. That order accords rank and importance: The pope, cardinals, bishops, monsignors, priests, deacons, consecrated religious brothers, sisters, laymen, laywomen.

Or, as Pope Francis put it recently to a group of about 1,000 people, across the church's hierarchical spectrum, in his own diocese, Rome.

"There is much resistance to overcome the image of a Church rigidly divided between leaders and subordinates, between those who teach and those who have to learn, forgetting that God likes to overturn positions."

The pope shared these thoughts ahead of the Synod of Bishops, which was opened by a Mass at the Vatican at the beginning of this month and will involve bishops, priests, women and men religious and the lay faithful in each of the more than 3,000 dioceses of the Catholic Church worldwide, including you and me.

"I have come here to encourage you to take this synodal process seriously," he told those assembled. "And to tell you that the Holy Spirit needs you... Listen to the Spirit, listen to each other, he said. "Do not leave anyone out."

Speaking about the process of the synod and reflecting on previous synods in the church's history, the pope said that *"it may be necessary for us, too, to change direction and overcome convictions that hold us back and prevent us from moving and walking together."*

We always want to compete for a place of honour, of recognition, and the pope recognized that *"there is always the temptation to go it alone,"* he said. He then spoke about the tendency each one has towards claiming authority for themselves as if *"when he ascended to heaven, the Lord had left a void to be filled,"* he explained.

The Greek word for synod, according to Pope Francis, means "walking together," where all have a voice and can express God's will, where we can all teach and learn from each other, and, Pope Francis said: *"discern what are the ways of the Gospel in the present."*

Not unlike the message we hear in today's readings, the pope reminded the faithful in Rome, but addressing Catholics throughout the world (and those outside the Catholic faith too, if they were listening to him) that the message of salvation that Jesus brings is for all:

"It is necessary to feel part of one great people who are the recipients of the divine promises," said Pope Francis, *"open to a future that awaits everyone to participate in the banquet prepared by God for all peoples."*

And lest, like the disciples, we should still think that to be called God's people is a prize of the lucky few, the pope stressed what he meant by all people:

“If the parish is the house of all in the neighbourhood, not an exclusive club, I recommend that you leave the doors and windows open, do not limit yourselves to those who frequent [the parish] or think like you. Let everyone enter.... Allow yourselves to go out to meet people and to be questioned by people. Let their questions be your questions; allow yourselves to walk together. The Spirit will lead you. Do not be afraid to enter into dialogue; it is the dialogue of salvation.”

And so friends, as we enter this Synodal process with the Church, which began at the beginning of this month, and will go on until October 2023, let us remember that call to all God’s people that among us there is no distinction. We are all called to see the vision of our Church that calls us to unity at last in the heavenly banquet where we will feast at God’s table.