29th Sunday Ordinary Time, B

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, are two of the all-time heroes of the Christian faith. They walked with Jesus almost from the beginning of his public ministry and were closer to him than any other apostles, except for Peter. John lived a long and honored life, and five books of the New Testament are attributed to his authorship. On the other hand, James was one of the earliest martyrs of the faith. Across the centuries these two brothers have stood as key examples of Christian discipleship at its highest and best.

This historical truth should be remembered as we look for the message in today's Gospel reading. It tells a story about James and John that may not seem to fit their image. These heroes of the faith and prime examples of discipleship came to Jesus with this request: **"Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left."** They wanted the two top spots in the kingdom and had the nerve to ask for them.

When the other disciples learned of this, they became angry with James and John. If we had been there, our reaction probably would have been the same. Sincere Christians, we think, are not supposed to have that kind of ambition. After all, one of the first conditions of discipleship is self-denial. Did not Jesus say, **"If the man wishes to come after me,**

he must deny his very self?" surely, there is no legitimate place for personal ambition among the serious followers of Christ.

But we should keep in mind that Jesus did not rebuke James and John for their request. He simply told them that they were asking for something which he did not have the power to give. Then he called them all together and tried to teach them the true meaning of greatness.

There is a lesson here for you and me. Jesus did not discourage personal ambition among his followers. On the contrary, he spent much of his time teaching ordinary people that they were important. He urged his disciples to strive for excellence, telling them that their holiness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, or else they could not enter the Kingdom of God.

Jesus believed that all people are endowed with a capacity for greatness, but most of them miss it because they seek it in the wrong ways. He said, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt." That is what greatness meant to most people in that ancient world. And sad to say, that is what it still means to this very day. Gain a little authority, get a little power; and then use it. Push the little people around. Make them your servants. You give the orders; they carry them out. If people jump to your command, then that means you are something special.

That is the standard concept of what it means to be a great man or a great woman, but Jesus contradicts it. He said to his disciples, “But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all.”

Notice that Jesus encouraged his disciples to aim for greatness, but he raised a new standard as to what that means – serve most, help most. Make yourself useful, which is what it means to be great. We may find it difficult to put it in practice; but in our finest hour, we know that it is true.

Have you ever thought how strange it is that Jesus, himself, is considered to be one of the great men of history?

He was nobody from a carpenter’s shop in the little town of Nazareth. He never had any money. He never held any office. He was hated by the establishment and finally died on the cross. Yet historians would say of him: **“No man can write an honest history of the development of civilization and the progress of humanity without giving a prominent place to the penniless Teacher of Nazareth.”** Why should that be?

Charles Lamb expressed the opinion that if Shakespeare were to enter the room, they would stand in respect; but if Christ were to enter, they would all bow in reverence. Most of us would do the same. Why should that be? All he ever did was help – that’s all. As he said in our reading,

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

The longer I preach Christ, the more amazed I am at his insight. He is so unexpectedly, incredibly right. Even when his message seems out of step with all common sense, he still turns out to be right.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The issue is put directly to every one of us: if we want to live a great life, if at the end we want to be remembered as a great man or a great woman, there is one way and one way only – **“Anyone among us who aims for greatness must serve the needs of all.” Amen.**