

29th Sunday (B)

- The Catholic Church at the 2nd Vatican Council in the early 1960s presented as radically new self-understanding.
- As you read through the document entitled "The Church in the Modern World", you gain a distinct impression that it sees itself as a servant Church – servant first & foremost to the kingdom of God as made known by the humble, reconciling, healing & non-violent Jesus Christ & secondly, servant to the needs of humanity for its dignified & peace-full coexistence.
- The notion is not entirely new because the martyr Church of the early centuries of persecution saw its role of proclaiming the Good News & risking life to do so by being of service to the liberating Gospel & to the dignifying of people.
- But to varying degrees & in various places & times since the 4th century, the Church has been caught up with worldly power, prestige, authority & triumphalism.
- For too long the Church before Vatican II saw itself as the Kingdom of God on earth & the perfect society, the Church of Vat. II proclaimed itself to be Servant, modelled on the servitude of Jesus who came not to be served but to serve that he might draw all into God.
- There's the temptation from the beginning of Christianity to slip into exercise leadership for self-promotion as shown in the shameful incident of today's Gospel - here, the founders of the community of the church act as egotists who try to outmaneuver one another to get the best positions – it sounds like modern-day party politics.
- Today's gospel provides a contrast between being served & being a servant.
- We hear the story of two of Jesus' disciples, James & John, who make the request to Jesus to receive a position of prominence in the Kingdom: "Let one of us sit at your right, & one at your left in Glory" they ask of Jesus.
- They wanted the most powerful positions in God's Kingdom after Jesus led a Messianic revolt to throw off the yoke of the Roman Empire, but in making that request, they were entirely in the mindset of imperial Rome.
- They wanted to throw off the Roman exercise of power, with some 'lording it' over others in an authoritarian way, but they wanted to be part of a similar sort of power structure ... for good purposes naturally!!?
- Jesus came to turn that sort of society upside-down & for the first three centuries of its existence, the Church, under persecution, was such an upside-down society, but after the Emperor Constantine recognised the Church in 312, & gave it official status, the Church started the process of forgetting, or ignoring today's Gospel.

- This reached its pinnacle from the 8th through to the 19th century during which at various times the Church's leadership took on much of the trappings of power & the way of ruling of imperial Rome.
- The Popes governed much of Italy & the Papacy was, from one point of view, just another European power - until the campaign to defeat the forces defending the Papal States which covered so much of Italy.
- The Pope was eventually forced to give up his role of feudal lord & retreated to being the sovereign of the mini-state of the Vatican City in 1870.
- The intertwined role of the pope as religious & spiritual leader with feudal-political leadership of his people was broken & it continues to be broken though some don't want to let go.
- It is only in more recent times that the Pope could adopt the title: 'Servant of the servants of God' & be in total harmony with today's Gospel: 'Anyone who wants to become great among you must become your servant.'
- Pope Francis embodies the spirit of today's Gospel; he has dramatically spoken of some elements of the central administration of the Papacy even today exhibiting what he called 'the leprosy of a feudal court'.
- Many in the Church today often refer back to his preferred vision of the Church: 'I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol & about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds... '.
- Today, there are examples all around us of the secular quest for greatness & its often accompanying spectacular fall - the by-elections this weekend in Wentworth in which the Liberal Party lost the safest seat it ever had is a good example.
- But the 2008 Financial Crisis was a huge example of how secular notions of power, wealth & greatness are so flimsy, so fragile, so built out of a 'confidence' that has no true foundation - the sort of wealth that Jesus says will 'corrupt & decay'.
- In contrast to worldly greatness, to be great in God's eyes is to be a servant modeled after Jesus' own life of service.
- I wholeheartedly believe that the Church has something to offer to the world - the example of true leadership that serves people, but it can only be a model of service if we live that servant leadership - not just as pope, bishops & priests, but each of us who is baptised.
- The people of the world desperately needs the modeling of servant leadership exercised in the secular world - we can show what that means.
- All too often our actions are more reflective of motivations of the secular world than the divine. So how do we all become better servants?
- One way is by making sure that the motivation for our service is love.
- In the week ahead, as you seek to serve God, check your motivation.

- Divine servanthood is always motivated by love.
- Another way to become better servants is by being mindful of who it is that calls us to serve - in all things we serve God, & God alone.
- By becoming more aware of God's presence in everyday life, we can strive to understand that all we do is somehow of God.
- With this approach, even the most mundane tasks that might not usually be associated with our spiritual lives can be viewed as service.
- Yet another way to become better servants is by ensuring that our church is a "servant church." - Is this parish a living servant church?
- Does it have a clear understanding that it exists in service to Jesus?
- Do all actions stem from Jesus' commission to proclaim the gospel?
- Does our liturgy, community outreach, & pastoral activities all have the possibility to transform those they touch?
- If not, then how can we make it so, for, after all, the mission of the church is the mission of Jesus Christ.
- Each & every one of us is called & commissioned to spread the Gospel in practical, prayerful ways.
- The story of James & John is disconcerting because even the most dedicated & self-effacing leaders would be able to see a bit of themselves in the story.
- But it is also a message of hope - Jesus proclaims that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, & to give his life as a ransom for many - Jesus promises us that although we will all fall short, through his death & resurrection we are transformed - & that is the Good News.
- Jesus understands our failures, our limitations, our fears, the times that we lack confidence in ourselves to do His work.
- He sees this, but He also sees so much more; He sees our talent; He sees our love; He sees our determination to seek Him out in others & serve His Presence.
- None of us has the right to feel that we are not good enough to be bearers of Christ to others - to work collaboratively as servant leaders for the world.