

Homily for October 11th, 2009

Introduction

Each of this Sunday's readings deals in one way or another with power - its uses and abuses.

From the Prophet Isaiah we hear the words which refer to the surprising way in which the future Messiah will exercise power: "If he gives his life... the will of the Lord will be accomplished through him".

St. Paul reminds us in the Second Reading: "we have a high priest...[Jesus] who has been tested in every way" Not the usual run of high priests.

And Jesus Himself instructs his apostles: "whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant"

I

Some years ago during my time in Peru an activist bishop spoke up on behalf of a sizeable group of squatters, telling them that they had a moral right to occupy and live on private property which was not being used by its owner. For saying this, the bishop was taken to jail, at which the Cardinal-Archbishop protested vigorously, stating that in a Catholic country like Peru it was unheard of to incarcerate a bishop. The next day, after a visit from the Cardinal, the president of the country ordered the jailed bishop to be freed. Everyone said that you can't fool with the Church in that country.

II

Sometime later those of us who were living and working there at that time began to question the underlying premise that the government had no business putting a Catholic bishop behind bars. We asked the hierarchy if it would not have been better for the Cardinal to simply state: "If a bishop goes to jail in this country because he is advising the poor of their rights, then put me in jail, too". Fortunately, the bishops and the Cardinal himself had been thinking along the same lines. They and we felt that Jesus' teaching indicates that the "power" of the hierarchy in a country like Peru - or anywhere for that matter - must be used as a service and not for domination.

III

It is easy to judge the bishops and point out their faults. But today's readings really question all of us. They offer much food for examination.

For example:

- in my life do I find myself reaching for power rather than seeking to serve?
- is my work within the parish community truly a service or is it just a camouflaged reach for power?

-or am I pretty good at serving within the framework of my faith community but in the rest of my life do I use or misuse power?

IV

Here, I need to stop and ask sincerely for pardon of each here for the tragic misuse of power committed by my brother priests against vulnerable children, youth and adults in the clergy scandal of our times. The harm done continues to affect the lives of thousands and is a sin that cries to heaven for vengeance.

Conclusion

In the play and movie "Jesus Christ Superstar", if I remember correctly, Judas comes off as an attractive figure. He is smart, aware of Jesus' impact on the crowds and anxious for the Lord to "make his move" and grab the power that is right at hand. However, that is not Jesus' way. He will turn away from power and be the "Suffering Servant" predicted by Isaiah, the "Lamb of God", who undergoes condemnation, suffering and execution as His way of saving humanity. A great mystery and a vivid lesson about the dangers of power and about Jesus' way of using it.