

HOW TO BE FIRST

October 2024

Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all (Mk 10: 43-44).

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and, for the third time, he tries to prepare his disciples for the dramatic event of his passion and death but those who have followed him most closely are the very ones who seem unable to understand what is about to happen.

In fact, conflict arises among the apostles themselves: James and John ask to occupy places of honour 'in his glory'¹ and the other ten become indignant and start to complain. In short, the group is divided.

Then Jesus patiently calls them and repeats what he has proclaimed. His words are so new that they create a sense of shock.

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In this phrase from Mark's gospel, the image of the servant-slave reaches a crescendo. Jesus leads us from having an attitude of simple availability within the limited and affirming groups to which we may belong to being totally dedicated to everyone, with no exception.

This is a completely alternative and countercultural proposal when compared to the usual human understanding of authority and governance which possibly fascinated the apostles themselves and impacts upon us too. Perhaps this is the secret of Christian love?

'One word in the gospel that is not emphasized enough by Christians is "serve". It may seem old-fashioned to us, unworthy of the dignity of human beings who both give and receive. Yet it is central to the gospel which is all about love. And to love means to serve. Jesus did not come to command but to serve. To serve, to serve one another is the heart of Christianity, and whoever lives this with simplicity – and everyone can do so – has done all that is necessary. Doing so ensures that people do not remain alone because since love is the essence of Christian life, it spreads like fire.'²

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The encounter with Jesus in his word opens our eyes, just as it did for the blind man, Bartimaeus, whose story is found immediately after this verse.³ Jesus frees us from our narrow vision and allows us to contemplate the horizons of God himself, of his plan for 'new heavens and a new earth.'⁴

Jesus washed the feet of others⁵ and by his example overturned the often rigid practice in society, and even in religious environments, of relegating the task of practical service to a certain class of people. Christians, therefore, should imitate Jesus' example and learn from him a new style of life in society. This means being a 'true neighbour' to each person we encounter, whatever their social or cultural condition may be.

As John Anziani, a Methodist pastor of the Waldensian Church, suggests, 'By agreeing to place our trust and our hope in the Lord, who is the servant of many, the Word of God asks us to act in our world and in the midst of all its contradictions, as people who work for peace and justice, as bridgebuilders who facilitate reconciliation among nations.'⁶

This is also how Igino Giordani, writer, journalist, politician and family man, lived during a time marked by dictatorship. To describe his experience, he wrote: 'Politics is – in the most dignified Christian sense – a "servant" and must not become a "master"; nor should it abuse, dominate or dictate. Its function and dignity are to be of service to society, to be charity in action, to be the highest form of love for one's homeland.'⁷

Through the witness of his life, Jesus proposes to us a conscious and free choice. Rather than living closed in on ourselves and our own interests, we are asked to 'live the life of the other person,' feeling what they feel, carrying their burdens and sharing their joys. We all have small or large responsibilities and spheres of authority. These may be in the field of politics or in other areas of society such as within our families, schools or faith communities. Let's take advantage of our 'places of honour' to put ourselves at the service of the common good, creating just and compassionate human relationships with everyone.

Edited by Letizia Magri and the Word of Life Team

¹ Cf. Mk 10: 37.

² Chiara Lubich, *Servire*, Città Nuova, XVII, 11-12, 1973, p.13.

³ Cf. Mk 10: 46-52.

⁴ Cf. Is. 65: 17 & 66: 25, rep. 2Pet. 3: 13.

⁵ Cf. Jn 13: 14.

⁶ <https://www.chiesavalde.org/>

⁷ P. Mazzola, *Perle di Igino Giordani*, Effatà, 2019.