

Twenty-ninth Sunday of the year

Reinvent the Church



Fr René Camilleri

But Jesus conceived his Church in a radically different way. The way Jesus is reacting to what James and John ask of him, and to the reaction of the other apostles, is to be considered a key issue in Mark's narrative because it establishes Jesus' alternative political model. It is important for us, even within our Church structures, to call things by their name, be it centralised power, injustice, abuse of power in the name of obedience, envy, or character assassination.

Jesus proposes his ideal of servant leadership. It may sound idealistic, compared to the highly inflated hierarchical structure that has characterised the Church for so long. But this is the only blueprint Jesus left for his Church. This is the New Testament vision for the Church. The figure of Jesus in the New Testament, and particularly in today's text, is a classic example of deconstruction of a religious world portrayed on the world of politics.

Today's readings: Isaiah 53, 10-11; Hebrews 4, 14-16; Mark 10, 35-45.

The story of James and John asking Jesus for one to be on his right hand and the other on the left in his glory further illustrates contrasting responses to the notion of discipleship even within Jesus' inner circle. It symbolises the retreat of those closest to Jesus from the *via crucis*. In a context where Jesus is speaking of discipleship and of his suffering, it sounds quite tragicomic for two of his to inquire on top posts in the new administration.

The disciples' request was based on a gross misconception of messianism. Jesus, even in our lives, is committed to break our addictions, not to feed them. God's word first uncovers our different forms of addiction so that it may break the vicious circle that so easily engulfs our whole being.

The only glory and power Jesus can grant his disciples is that of the *via crucis*. But like the two disciples, we automatically think of God as someone who possesses and wields power. Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino argues that "the Cross forces us to reformulate the whole problem of God. God is to be recognised through what seems to be quite the opposite of divine, i.e. suffering". Theology after the holocaust is no longer the same. The Cross signifies the end of traditional theology.

In today's Gospel, particularly in the second part, Jesus proposes also a critique of centralised power, even in Church circles. "This is not to happen among you," says Jesus. In the Church there is what we often refer to as ecclesiastical politics, which many a time is corridor gossip just as terrible as in the political realm.

Today's text may be good advice for the Church as it should be and as it should function. Many times it's not the authority of the Church that is being put to question, but the exercise of that authority. John D. Caputo, a leading voice on religion and post-modernism, refers to the words of Jesus in today's Gospel in his book *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* He writes that "it is a kind of managerial madness, that is the very foolishness of the Kingdom of God, which Jesus deconstructed in his own life".

Jesus was an outspoken critic of the powers that be, and it cost him dearly. Like Jesus, the Church is called to translate poetics into praxis. Otherwise, the alternative that remains would be for it to end up suppressing the very Kingdom of God that is its mission. Deconstruction is the ageless task imposed on the Church and its way to the future, requiring a willingness to reinvent itself in an ongoing self-renewal.

Falling prey to the temptation of James and John means mixing things up and identifying the Church with the Kingdom of God. What keeps the Church in the right perspective is the tension towards the bigger and broader reality of God's kingdom. It is also the remedy against the delusion of grandiosity which often takes over, even substituting the Church for God.

The diplomat, the politician and the Archbishop



Fr Joe Borg

Since in this commentary I usually tackle only one subject at a time I have to refrain from commenting on various incidents, ideas or events. Perhaps it would not be amiss if, from time to time, I try to cover several topics in one go. Let's give it a try.

Who guards us from 'we the people'?

I loved listening to US Ambassador Douglas Kmiec's speech delivered at the Meusac forum discussing the implications of the Irish yes vote in the referendum. Quite naturally, he said things ambassadors are expected to say. However, he also spoke as an academic, and I liked these parts of his speech most.

The ambassador reflected on the way the US Constitution was formulated, and drew a number of parallels on what is happening in Europe with the Lisbon Treaty. He not only pointed out that the US Constitution was the document enshrining the beliefs of 'we the people' but reflected on this statement too.

I paraphrase very liberally his reflections and add mine on top of them. Should 'we the people' be the ultimate justification of every piece of legislation enacted, human acts engaged into, policies announced, etc.? Who should guard us from 'the people'? If the people say paedophilia is right, will it become right? It may become legal but it will never become right.

Believers are privileged as they can refer to a higher authority that lights the path of the people and guards us from any excesses. Non-believers have a tougher route to traverse to arrive at a similar stage.



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Prelates and politicians

Some years back the Vatican published a document addressed to Christian politicians. I discussed it with a Maltese politician whose Catholic credentials are impeccable. "The problem with this document," he told me, "is that whoever wrote it knows next to nothing about politics." He then amply explained the reasons for his statement.

I still remember this incident whenever I hear members of the clergy on various occasions, and especially in Sunday homilies, pontificating on so many different subjects, when among their listeners there are people more competent than they to speak on the same subjects.

The Silence of the Lambs could very well double as the title of a documentary on most of our laity. The question 'why' has never, in my opinion, been adequately addressed. Whoever manages, for example, to find the reason why the laity are playing third fiddle in the divorce debate would be giving a valid contribution to the Church.

However, let me backtrack to the relationship between prelates and politicians. Last January I had written about the autonomy of Catholic MPs.

I referred to the incident when Alcide de Gasperi decided to ignore the express wish of Pope Pius XII as communicated to him by the

highest authorities at the Secretariat of State at the Vatican. The Pope was not amused. De Gasperi was in the right. He behaved as mature Catholic politicians should behave; that is, as a political leader not as an altar boy.

The myriad challenges that our society is facing demands Catholic politicians with a level of maturity similar to that of the post-war beacon of Italy's *Democrazia Cristiana*.

The Archbishop on the Web

Kull deni hudu b'g'id is a Maltese version of the well-known proverb 'every cloud has a silver lining'. Our dear Archbishop must have experienced the wisdom of this proverb. His home confinement due to Swine Flu must have provided him with an ideal occasion to put into practice one of the new features of the radically revamped website of the Archdiocese maltadiocese.org.

Prominently placed on the website is a function enabling people to send an e-mail to Mgr Cremona. Many must have sent him good wishes and he must have had more time to answer.

I like the website's new design and content and would like to congratulate those responsible for it. I invite readers to visit it. Sending a message to Mgr Cremona to wish him well and give him your opinion about the Church would not be amiss.

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Quotes and news

Bishops blast abortion proposal

The bishops of Peru are opposing proposed legislation that would legalise abortion in cases of rape or birth defect.

"Life is a right from its conception... any attempt to justify the elimination of children about to be born into illness or disability brings to light our difficulty in accepting sick people," the bishops said in statement. "Since we've done away with the death penalty in Peru for even the worst criminals, how can we accept the death penalty for an embryo that hasn't even had the time to commit a mistake and cannot even defend itself?"

Reactions to Obama Nobel Peace Prize

US bishops have congratulated President Barack Obama for his being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, speaking in his capacity as president of the US Bishops, said that the Nobel prize was a recognition that President Obama "has already changed the international conversation".

Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi, SJ, told journalists that the news "was greeted with appreciation at the Vatican in light of the President's demonstrated commitment to promoting peace on an international level". However, *L'Ossevatore Romano* said that the award seemed "premature" as

the achievements of Obama are very limited. The Vatican paper suggested that the Nobel committee offered the American leader the award as a way of "pressuring Obama to make pacifist choices".

Bishops defend the Amazon

Thirty Catholic bishops serving in the Amazon region said in a statement it is time to stop destroying the rain forest and threatening its people's welfare in the name of progress. They called for policies that "take responsibility for preservation of the biological and cultural diversity of the Amazon". They rejected both the commercial view of the Amazon as an "inexhaustible" source of natural

resources and a gene pool that might hold a cure for diseases, and the romantic concept of the region as a pristine green "lung".

The poker priest

Is poker a vice or a valid pastoral activity? Fr Andrew Trapp, a 28-year-old priest of the diocese of Charleston, seems to be turning it into the latter. He is one of four finalists in the *Pokerstars.net Million-Dollar Challenge*, a TV show on the Fox network. Fr Trapp, who received permission from his church superiors to compete, won \$100,000 in the semi-final round and donated the funds to his parish.

Fr Trapp now has the chance to win one million dollars which

would also be donated to the parish.

Bishops, Obama clash on health care

US Bishops have said the health reform bill being considered by the Senate finance committee does not exclude the use of public funds for abortion. On the other hand, White House press secretary Robert Gibbs has said twice in the space of a few days that the bishops' interpretation is mistaken.

However, according to Catholic News Service, the non-partisan watchdog group Factcheck.org is of the opinion that the health care legislation would allow for federal funding of abortions.

(Compiled by Fr Joe Borg)