

There is a saying that 'we get the leaders that we deserve' but Jesus is the leader we do not deserve and the disciples behaviour in today's gospel passage is a clear example of this – these are the disciples Jesus does not deserve but representative of us all, the material he's been given to work with, and each of their failings he turns to good. They are a work in process, just like us – the sinners called in yesterday's gospel to sit at table with Christ. The mistake the Pharisees made then in judging others as sinful was not to recognise the sin in themselves – all the pettiness of self promotion which Jesus will highlight more explicitly elsewhere: the wearing of broad phylacteries, the taking of the best seats in synagogue and at table, praying long prayers ostentatiously in public and so on. The call to follow Christ does not automatically undo all these self-referential shortcomings, the false ego one might say, takes a long time to dismantle, to be seen for what it is. It's salutary to read the words of Gregory the Great:

“The conduct of a prelate should so far surpass the conduct of the people, as the life of a pastor sets him apart from his flock. For one who is so regarded that the people are called his flock, must carefully consider how necessary it is for him to maintain a life of rectitude. It is necessary therefore that he should be pure in thought, exemplary in conduct, discreet in keeping silence, profitable in speech, in sympathy a near neighbour to everyone, in contemplation exalted above all others, a humble companion to those who lead good lives, erect in his zeal for righteousness against the vices of sinners. He must not be remiss in his care for the inner life by preoccupation with the external: nor must he in his solicitude for what is internal, fail to give attention to the external.” (Pastoral Care part 2 ch.1)

There's much more in similar vein and one is tempted to throw in the towel as it's such a delicate balancing act. This came home to me yesterday at a training session of the CSSA (the Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency) trying to balance all sorts of conflicting demands, perhaps summed up in the tension between when to act and when not to act. At some point one is almost certainly going to get it wrong, but fear of getting it wrong is no excuse for not trying and the saving element in both situations is the humility to acknowledge failure. This is a tough one because we live in a very unforgiving society. This is a matter of grace not only for those called to lead but for this called to follow as the letter of James makes very clear. If we wish to have the leaders we deserve then a radical change is demanded of each one of us too.

“You have ambition that you cannot satisfy; so you fight to get your way by force. Why you don't have what you want is because you don't pray for it.....you have prayed (instead) for something to indulge your own desires.”

This is where the internal and the external life come together. Where we need to become a prayer, to allow the Holy Spirit to be so at work within us that all these various tensions are resolved. We become Christ the undeserved leader within and without.

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