

At the end of my first year in Trinity I took a summer job with the British Scientific Service. My idea was to get a flavour of what it would be like to work in one of the scientific establishments. I was duly posted to the Admiralty Surface Weapons Establishment which was set on the hills overlooking Portsmouth Harbour with a fabulous view over the naval base and round to Southampton.

I realised in a Naval establishment there would be a hierarchy; I was surprised however how deeply it was ingrained in the whole fabric of the place. Being a summer student, I was the lowest form of life so had no access to the current internal telephone directory, as it was deemed to be a classified document – I was however allowed access to the out of date one. They relented when one afternoon, while trying to contact the photographic department, I inadvertently telephoned the direct line of a Rear Admiral. Office furniture was awarded by rank. I had a plain desk, with a single drawer, a basic chair all set on a lino floor. The next grade up would get a desk with drawers down one side. Then as you rose through the ranks you eventually got a rug underneath your desk and finally wall to wall carpeting. On one occasion apparently a room that had been allocated to a man who qualified for wall to wall carpeting was given to a man that should only get a rug – a carpenter was sent with a Stanley knife to reduce the wall to wall carpet to a rug. There was, as I say, a definite hierarchy with clear lines of authority; you were either above someone or below someone. As a colleague said to me, if you were called into a room with deep pile carpet, you knew to say ‘Sir’.

The memories of that summer came back to me as I reflected on our Gospel reading for today. Hierarchy, knowing where you stand, the idea of upward mobility are very much part of our makeup. The verse of ‘All things bright and beautiful’ that we now no longer sing:

‘The rich man in his castle,
the poor man at his gate;
God gave them each their station
and ordered their estate.’

comes from an era when ‘people knew their place’ In the Gospel reading James and John are portrayed as jockeying for a privileged position. One senses as the story develops that the annoyance of the rest of the disciples comes from them having got their spoke in first.

Jesus draws them together, reminds them of how authority operates in the world and then says:

⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

We are presented with two contrasting, radically contrasting, models of authority arising from two different models of community. The first shall be last and the last first is a very different model of community to that with which the world is familiar with, or comfortable with. In a community defined by hierarchies you know where you stand in relation to everyone else; in what situations it is appropriate to assert yourself and when it is appropriate to submit to the will of others.

‘But it is not so among you.’

In the person of Jesus we see an authority expressed not in power but in service. And the disciples, and through them ourselves, are called to model that in our dealings with one another and in our common life together. He, their Lord and Master, washed his disciples feet and called upon them to do the same. The whole concept of incarnation, of God present in the person of Jesus, embodies, incarnates this upside down world of the first being last and the last first. Writing to his beloved Philippians, Paul talks first of emptying, of surrender of self:

‘He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.’; of obedience unto death, ‘even death on a cross’

And only then of exaltation, of Lordship – ‘every knee should bend, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

In the Gospels we read of only those prepared to lose their lives in fact finding them. Crucifixion, resurrection reflected in the in the individual and community life of the

Christian. In the Sacrament of Baptism, as the sponsors prepare to enter into the promises of Baptism, we are all reminded that ‘to follow Christ means dying to sin and rising to new life with him.’

The Church is more than just a group of admirers of Jesus; the Church is the Body of Christ, a community in whom and through whom Christ is made present in the world of today. We are to be the hands, the feet, the lips of Christ in the world of today; in our homes, our neighbourhoods, our shops, businesses and schools, our places of recreation and leisure. We are called to a different way of living, a different way of relating in the midst of the realities of this imperfect world.

We are a very varied community. Quite apart from the range of ages, of temperament there are differences in cultural and national background; there are a huge range of life experiences represented in the pews of this Church. For some, life has been relatively easy; for others, there have been times of great pain and anxiety in personal and family life. For some, faith comes quite naturally, for others it is at times a struggle to believe in the face of life. But we are all members of the one body, seeking to find meaning and purpose through our individual and shared discipleship of Christ. At the heart of our common life there must be a deep and fundamental honouring of one another as ones made in the image of God, redeemed and inspired by him.

This has a huge bearing on how we see ourselves, on how authority, how leadership is to be understood in the life of the Church. Honouring one another, we cannot seek to dominate one another. Leadership is not about one group imposing its will on another. It is about service. And so, as a community, as the Body of Christ in this place, as we seek to respond to the changes in our society, to the changing circumstances in which the Gospel is proclaimed, an integral part of our common life is our honouring of one another. An integral part of that honouring of one another will be our listening to one another, our understanding of one another, our service of one another.