

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

A number of us here will remember the great excitement in the Church surrounding the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and how things were going to change in the church. There was one particular Bishop in Ireland who came back from Rome full of beans and in one of the local parishes the following Sunday he was telling the people that we are all of equal standing now in the church, me right down to you. After a ripple of laughter from the congregation the bishop realised the gaffe he had made.

But it doesn't just appropriate to catholic clergy. TV evangelists are well known for turning religious broadcasting into a kind of personality cult. Worship of the preacher takes over from worship of God and many people seem to be swayed by it.

Isn't this what Jesus is referring to in today's gospel regarding the religious leaders of his day. They liked the limelight and being put on pedestals. They loved people kowtowing to them. They rarely practiced what they preached. They burdened their people with all sorts of man-made rules and regulations. They used religion to keep people in servitude whilst at the same time upstaging themselves. But Jesus showed them up for what they were and that didn't go down very well.

I think we as an institutional church are not above criticism in this regard. Clergy sometimes overestimated themselves to the detriment of their mission to serve. It's called clericalism. Vat 11 in the 1960's tried to correct this but 'old habits die hard'. The emergence of Pope Francis's synodal church might have better luck. Some time back there was quite a bit in the religious papers about the apparitions in Maedjugorge (former Yugoslavia), on whether they were true or fake. To me what may tilt the balance in their favour was when one of the seers asked Our Lady 'what is the greatest need in the church at present'. No, not vocations or women priests or married

priests. She is reported to have said: Your greatest need is for humility and simplicity. These things won't hit the headlines.

But isn't that precisely what Our Lord is asking of us in today's Gospel?

Our Lord, himself is, as always, our perfect example. He said 'all authority is heaven and Earth has been given to me' and yet he himself lived a simple life with no airs and graces. Scripture tells us '*he didn't even cling to his equality with God*' Even his enemies said that a person's rank meant nothing to Him. He spoke with authority not to keep people down but help them to stand on their own two feet and recognise their innate dignity as children of a loving Father. Taking on a servant's role, he washed the apostles' feet and asked them to do the same. Finally he endured the ultimate indignity of the Cross. Unlike the religious leaders of his day He was devoid of any hint of self-glorification. He shunned it like the plague.

The Church has always been slow on the uptake to embrace this kind of authority but perhaps, with the shortage of vocations and a greater reliance on lay people, sounds like we're on the road to a brighter future where authority will be exercised as the Lord intended - thus creating a humbler church for the benefit of all.