

Proper 24 B
October 21st, 2018
Mark 10: 35-45
St. George's Episcopal Church
Fr. Chris

The Crazy Inverted Ladder of Success

Servant of all. We as Christians excel by our service to others.

When I think of a servant, I think of a uniformed person serving the needs of the powerful, rich and successful in this life, sort of like Downton Abbey. While by this world's standards this doesn't seem to be fair, God is telling us that service to others is what the Christian life is all about. Really?

Life is about serving others, and not self-serving! The focus of the Christian is to be on others and not themselves. God does and will take care of you and I. We need not worry. We should trust God and reach out and serve.

In every line of work there is a pecking order, a ladder, where we begin on the bottom rung and climb to the top. We are encouraged by our parents, our peers, our superiors, to strive for the next rung on the ladder of success. Get to the next rung? well then, climb higher! When have we done what is good enough to satisfy others and ourselves?

The church is no different. As a so-called church professional, you begin on the lowest rung, as a deacon (interesting-this is the ministerial order that is all about service) and you serve as an assistant or as a 'curate' to an experienced priest. Eventually, after a couple of years or so, you are encouraged to leave the safety of this nest and either to go to a larger parish and be an assistant, or what is more likely, to leave and get a small "starter parish" of your own. (Some place like St. George's.) You are given a new title, indicating that you are a Vicar or a Rector. A vicar is a pastor of a small mission parish supported by the diocese, and Rector is the pastor of a self-supporting parish. The term "Rector" in Latin means "ruler." Rectors were rulers in the Roman Empire. This Latin word indicates a power and position that exceeds anything in our so called democratic society, because a Rector, after he or she is elected by the whole congregation has a life tenure, and that person is only responsible to report to the next higher person on the church ladder, the Bishop. What the Rector says is final. Many Rectors have been resisted rather than revered over the years for exercising their authority over others. "Tyrants Lord their power over others, but you are not to be that way."

Once you have become a Rector, it is time to climb the church ladder of success after a few years. The next step is to collect titles, which you do by “serving” on committees. You could be chairperson of this or that committee, or president of the Standing Committee or Executive Council. You used to be able to be a “Dean” of the Deanery. After having added these titles to your resume, it is time to move on. The next step up the ladder is a “large” parish, equal to your abilities as a church leader. And from there, you can proceed to even greater heights, such as receiving the title of Cathedral Canon or Dean, or working on the Diocesan Staff. Next, at almost the top rung of the ladder is the office of Bishop.

Isn't it interesting that you can rise even higher than Bishop? Like the young clergyperson, you can become head of the Diocese if you are a Bishop Suffragan (that is, assistant Bishop) or if you are Bishop of a small Diocese, you can become Bishop of a larger and more important Diocese, like Washington, Los Angeles or New York. And if once you've reached this exalted level and you still don't feel as though you made it to the tippy top, there is always the presiding Bishop of the whole Church. We don't have a Pope.

Wow! Sounds just like the ladder of success everywhere else in our world! Yet there is a little secret here: The Bishop is called to be the Servant of the Servants of God, in other words, The Bishop is to be the opposite of the top of the ladder of worldly success. In the Church, that ladder is inverted and we are to climb down it, to where we are not only servants, but also we are servants of servants. Would that human beings remembered which way the church ladder of success is headed, climbing down and not up to the heights of successfulness in this world.

During my ministry I have been encouraged by my parents when I was younger and by my peers as I got older to climb the ladder of churchly success. Look where it got me. You might say I have been a failure by the standards of this world. When I was looking to be a pastor of my own first parish, I was turned down by several of the parishes where I applied, because I was too young. When I got serious interest from a parish in Hartford, my peers and my spiritual director said, don't go to that one, it's a pain and is ready to close down. I remember being prompted after becoming a Rector, to seek a larger church or to run for bishop. I must confess, I looked at those options because I believed that that is the way to be successful in this world. And yes, by all means of accounting, that is how this world measures success: By salary, title, job position, and size of your business. I really didn't get it, and yet it was all there in front of me in the words of the person I claimed to follow. “Whoever wishes to become greater among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

Ministry is about service and a successful ministry is about good service, humble service, faithful service, courageous service to those who are placed in front of us to be served. That might be a parishioner in need or in a nursing home. It might be someone standing in line waiting for the Foodshare Truck on Tuesday morning. This I know: titles do not matter. Rank is not important. What is vital is the service to others, the focus on others instead of yourself.

God has given you and me an excellent opportunity in this humble parish to be servants to one another and to those in the world whom we encounter outside of these doors. We are lucky because we don't have a lot of the things to distract us from this service that other church's might afford, and me especially, because I have been so easily distracted and have wandered astray before.

Lastly, remember our example, the example of Jesus: God came not to be served but to serve. AMEN