

The day is young. There have been lots of firsts this morning already. The first one in your house to get up and open their curtains. The first person to say a prayer, bringing God into their first thoughts; the first to perform perfect tasks or to start work in houses, the first to do exercise or training. The first dog to be walked. The first chorister to arrive for pre-Mass rehearsals, and the first altar server to help prepare for Mass. And the first to arrive in Church to pray before Mass so to be ready and recollected for worship. One of you welcomed a visitor to the Church and were the first member of the School community to do so today. Hours before all of this, those preparing your breakfast did so first, not long after first sunlight on a wet Michaelmas Sunday morning.

My own first today, after a first cup of tea of course, was to arrive in the Abbey Church, unlock the building, deactivate the alarms, switch the lights and the sound system on, and make sure the Mass leaflets were ready for when the organist and choir members arrived to rehearse.

I think most of these firsts are in line with what Jesus tells us in our gospel. Jesus says to all disciples: *if anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all*. In a very quiet way, being a first responder in Jesus' name helps to realise His kingdom, rather than build our own. Jesus is the first born of all creation but was prepared to put himself last. He did not cling to His equality with God but humbled Himself taking the form of a servant.

A quick shout out for Pope St Gregory the Great, patron saint of Downside; yes, he got the top job back in the year 590, but only because of his service. Whilst his status as Pope was above ours, the depth of his service dug down deeper, Gregory says: *I am the servant of the servants. Servus servorum Dei* in Latin. Maybe we could try to outdo St Gregory by becoming servants-squared of the servants of God. St Benedict teaches that living with such humility is like scaling a ladder up to heaven like the one Jacob saw in a dream. No matter how humble we might be, Christ was humbler yet, even to accepting death on a cross. His cross is the ladder up to heaven.

Long before Jesus died on the cross, he first prepared his disciples by explaining it to them, like at the start of our gospel today. But they didn't understand it. It's like a teacher explaining things to a class. Every teacher will be concerned if their class is too noisy; but if the students are too quiet, then maybe their lesson hasn't gone too well either. The students reduced to silence in our gospel are the disciples; *they did not understand what (their teacher) said and were afraid to ask him*. Then like the lamentable lost lesson, the unconstructive chatter began, arguing about who was the greatest. Yes, Peter Andrew James John Matthew and all twelve were human like you and me, jostling for position, superiority and preference. Why did they behave this way? Here's why. Whilst

Jesus was ambitious for the coming of God's Kingdom, the disciples were ambitious for their own little kingdoms where themselves, not God, came first. Newly elected School council members take note. If you want to be first, you must make yourself last of all and servant of all. On Friday I heard the servers of the altar discussing who had been serving for the greatest number of years or the greatest number of Masses. Little did they know Father was listening out for examples to use in the Sunday sermon. Our greatness is found in our willingness to serve as often as possible; as St Benedict also says: *if we wish to dwell in the tent of the kingdom, we must run to it by good deeds.*

So the disciples weren't getting it. They needed some remedial instruction at the kingdom clinic of Capernaum. This time the disciples got it. Here's how. Jesus was kind to a child. The Aramaic word for *child* is also the word for *servant*. Remember that the disciples were looking at a child of their time and not ours. Back then, children were totally at the mercy of adults, unlike today when adults are at the mercy of children! Childhood is a recent concept, before which the vulnerability of children was obvious. Many died of diseases which today are no threat. To see what a child from the time of Jesus was like, look at children in the developing world today: babies dying from drinking contaminated water; young children helplessly weak with incurable illnesses; most children lucky if they have enough to eat to keep them alive and well; children scratching a living working in the fields; children helping to run the house and taking care of their orphaned younger brothers and sisters. It is this kind of child that Jesus tells his disciples to serve. He took one of the most vulnerable and powerless members of his society and asked the disciples to look after them. To welcome and cherish this most valuable of God's creations and make sure it was flourishing. Jesus insisted that His people had to extend concern to the weakest members of society, to those who had not the power, authority or money to look after themselves.

May Jesus' teaching resound in our ears and be echoed in our hearts this Sunday: *If anyone would be first they must be last of all and servant of all.* In the closing words of today's Psalm, we pray to the Lord who upholds my life, upholds my life: *I will sacrifice to you with willing heart, and praise your name for it is good.*

Dear brothers and sisters, a child from St Benedict's school visiting last Tuesday asked me why the word *Pax* was seen around the Church. It means peace. Peace is the truth sent from above. As our second reading explained: peace is the fruit of wisdom and service. War and worldly ambition result from the sour grapes of self-service. We pray for the victory of Christ's kingdom of peace, we help bring it about through our service of others especially the neediest, and through our humble sacrifices. Be first. Serve. Amen.