

ΔΙΑΚΟΝΙΑ

SERVICE

Preaching the Gospel gives me nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion – I should be in trouble if I failed to do it. If I did it on my own initiative, I would deserve a reward; but if I do it under compulsion, I am simply accepting a task entrusted to me. What reward do I have then? That in my preaching I offer the Gospel free of charge, to avoid using the rights which the Gospel gives me. So although I was not a slave to any human being, I put myself in slavery to all people, to win as many as I could.

(1 Corinthians 9)

ΔΙΑΚΟΝΙΑ is *service*, but the concept of *slavery* – the service that is without reward – is very close to it. Jesus and Paul both use the words almost indiscriminately. When we are called to serve, therefore, we should remember Christ the Servant, and believe that we cannot be treated in any way that would make us lower than he made himself, with the divine freedom of his incarnation.

The role of servant, therefore, is different in worldly terms from the ΔΙΑΚΟΝΙΑ of the Christian. Earthly servants are subordinated to others for an agreed reward. We become servants of one another out of love, not counting the cost, but spending ourselves as freely as Jesus. This spirit must be seen in us in many ways:

- in our generosity on a daily basis, so that it becomes “second nature” to refuse laziness and self-indulgence in favour of the service of others
- in our selflessness – eliminating our advantage in favour of the benefit of the Community
- in the ulterior kindness expressed in the Sermon on the Mount (*turn the other cheek, go two miles, let him have your tunic*)

Service of others can be intensely boring, and the lack of a pay-off can become very painful for our self-esteem. You can get into a negative frame of mind if you try to make the system add up in human terms – keeping accounts, as it were, and trying to balance your books personally. If you manage to do this, it is a sign that your service of others is based on self-satisfaction, and is a piece of vanity. You are, in Augustine’s words, *feeding your own sheep, but not feeding the sheep of Christ*.

Must the Master be grateful to the servant for doing what he was told? So with you: when you have done everything you have been told to do, say: We are unprofitable servants, we have done no more than our duty.

Reading from Scripture

The best reading for this morning is probably the beginning of the Last Supper story in **John 13**.

See the emphasis on the Father's trust in his Son, and the close way John relates this to the washing, work *lower* than the work of a slave. Jesus displays this shocking abasement in his last hours as a free agent, so that the disciples will use it, in memory, as a key to what happens to him as a prisoner, and as a convict.

Notice again the two different interpretations of Jesus' servitude towards the disciples:

- the one they are asked to understand then and there – *I have given you an example, which you must follow*;
- the one Peter cannot yet understand, and will only understand later (after the Crucifixion); for which reason *you cannot follow me now; you will follow me later*.

Realize that we can give service which makes human sense, when we try to imitate the example of Jesus and love the brethren, feed the hungry, tend the sick and so on. Any decent human being might want to do these things. But there is a level of service which requires the resurrection as its logic, its explanation. Peter and the others were unable to receive this *before the Passion*, with any human comprehension. This is the specifically *Christian* service which is connected with the Cross, and to which all the faithful ought to aspire. Deacons commit themselves to Christian service, and by their very name they *entitle* themselves to it.

Meditation on ΔΙΑΚΟΝΙΑ, then, takes its tone from meditation on the Passion. This is the link which gives diaconal service its true context. Crucifixion is the fate of a condemned slave; but Jesus accepts it in perfect freedom. The vital condition for a valid marriage is fulness of consent; we should pray today for a full consent to the grace of following Christ into the mystery of the Cross, and help one another to enter into this mystery, so close to the meaning of the ordination of a Deacon.

