

LEADERSHIP AND AUTHORITY: 31ST SUNDAY A

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A major in the army, wearing his epaulettes and service medals, was in his new office, when an army private knocked on the door. To impress the private the major called out in a pompous voice: 'Come in, soldier! I'll be right with you after I answer this phone call.' Then speaking into the phone the major said: 'Well, General, it's good to hear your voice. How can I help you?' A pause followed. Then the major said: 'Fine, General, I'll call the Prime Minister within the hour.' Then he said to the private who was staring at the floor nervously: 'Now, soldier, what can I do for you?' Without looking up, the private said in a low voice: 'Sir, my sergeant sent me to connect your phone for you.'

That major caught himself out. He showed himself to be something of a liar, a fake, and a hypocrite, the very things that in the gospel today Jesus both accused the Pharisees of being, and cautioned his followers not to be.

When I read those words of Jesus, however, and ask myself how they apply to me, I have to admit they make me feel uncomfortable and embarrassed. Here I am up the front, wearing long robes, and being called 'Father'. Let me assure you, then, that I'm not here to parade, or show off, or to make out that I'm a better or superior person to any one of you. I sincerely strive to make my own the words of the psalmist today: 'O Lord, my heart is not proud nor haughty my eyes. I have not gone after things too great nor marvels beyond me'.

Authority in any organisation, the Church included, is meant to be a gift. It is meant to be shown in loving service and support of others, not in domination and control. It's just not good enough to make people simply comply and obey. People may do that on the outside, while on the inside they are seething with rage and resentment. The challenge for all leaders is to get others onside, to win their hearts and minds, to persuade and convince them that this or that is the right thing to do. That, of course, requires all the skills that go into winning friends and influencing people. In fact, that's the only kind of authority that works in any community nowadays, the family included.

Again and again in his teaching Jesus insists that we must not dominate, lord it over, or oppress others! He teaches over and over that God invites, calls,

attracts and charms, rather than controls, directs, and regulates! He teaches too that the greatest in any group are those who love and serve the others!

So that we might do a better job than we have done so far of living those teachings of Jesus, let us pray together to the Lord, in the rest of our Eucharist today, for both ourselves and one another!

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