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# Learning Lessons, Serving God and Others

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## **Learning Lessons, Serving God and Others**

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## **Second Sunday of Ordinary Time**

Sunday Readings for January 16, 2011 for Cycle A:

Is 49:3-6; Ps 40; 1 Cor 1:1-3; Jn 1:29-34

### **LEARNING LESSONS, SERVING GOD AND OTHERS**

#### ***Lawrence E. Frizzell***

Aspects of the Gospel message have penetrated into the fabric of modern culture and exert an influence even on those who do not know their source. One of these contributions of the Bible to the social and political orders is the ideal of service. The leader of many nations is called the "prime minister" or first servant; this person should exemplify the principle "whoever would be great among you must be your servant" (Mt 20:26). Only in this way can authority be exercised without the position becoming, at least sometimes, the vehicle for foisting naked power or brute force upon others as a means of achieving goals.

The biblical heritage not only envisions leadership as service of the community, but above all teaches that all authentic use of authority must be related to service of God. This is the meaning of the Hebrew term behind the word "liturgy" (the Greek term means "work of the people"). Understanding and living this principle should eliminate the self-aggrandizement that leads to the worst form of idolatry.

When the chosen people were in Exile (586-538 BC) they again experienced the horrors of servitude. A prophet-disciple of Isaiah reminded them that they are servants only of God. He promised that a servant would be raised up to restore the tribes of Jacob. This person would also be a light to the nations so that God's salvation would permeate all the earth (Is 49:1-6).

The teachers in the early Church recognized that Jesus of Nazareth was God's chosen instrument, the Servant who was also shepherd of Israel as Moses and David had been. His ministry was not only self-effacing but also sacrificial. "The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep" (Jn 10:11). Jesus was a king, giving a new definition to government; following the Jewish tradition, he stressed that authority in any society derives from God and places the leader under divine judgment (Jn 19:11).

Can such principles flourish in a world where pride and greed often propel people to seek high offices? True service is incompatible with sin. So the Fourth Gospel presents Jesus first as Victim and then as priest and king. "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). God can deal with sin in judgment, but then the finality of the divine act might preclude another chance for the sinner. So Jesus first came "not to judge the world but to save the world" (Jn 12:47). From ancient times two lambs were offered daily in the afternoon sacrifice of the Jerusalem Temple. This offering was expressly for the forgiveness of sin. At the beginning of Passover the numerous lambs needed for the feast were offered at this time. Thus does the Fourth Gospel portray the death of Jesus as a sacrifice for the world's deliverance from sin (Jn 19:28-37).

Today's Gospel does not focus on the very act of Jesus' baptism by John, but in Matthew (3:13-17) Jesus thus unites himself with the sinful human community as its servant (Mt 8:17). John points rather to the presence of the Spirit abiding with Jesus. Purification from sin is the first step of the process whereby individual people and eventually all society receive new life. The purpose of Jesus's work, consummated in his death-and-resurrection, is that people may believe that he is God's Son and thus have life in his name (Jn 20:31). The risen Lord bestowed this Spirit upon the Church so that, after sins are forgiven, new life can be experienced as a service of God (Jn 20:22-23). Thus in worship we unite ourselves with Christ the high priest and receive him as the Lamb who restores our innocence. This will enable us to do our part in guiding our society and world into a right relationship with God and all his creation.