

'The greatest among you must be your servant.'

"The greatest among you must be your servant", but we could actually translate the word servant as deacon, because the Greek word in the Gospel is the same as our word for a deacon, "diakonos." Now, the first reading was a great attack on the priests. But you know everybody gets told off today actually. Priests, leaders, and laypeople. First of all, the priest in Malachi, you heard the reading... they set themselves above the people and fail to render service. But the leaders of the people, especially teachers... they get told off too. So that's embarrassing too, isn't it? That's what the scribes were, they were teachers of the law, interpreters of the law, and they made heavy work of God's law. Jesus says they like to impose impossible burdens for others to carry. The scribes were hindering, not serving. And then you've got the best of the laypeople - the Pharisees. They were the devout who ran the synagogues, obeyed all the rules, but they tended to look down on others, who were not as strict as themselves - they looked upon them as riff-raff.

But Christ, in the Gospel, I think, knows humanity so well. He sees that all of those priests, leaders, teachers, devout laypeople, were all prone to see themselves as superior to other Jewish people. We too have a tendency to see ourselves as better than others. In other words. There was a survey done in America asking people, "Did they think they were better living people than their next-door neighbors," and something like 80% said yes. So somebody's got to be wrong, haven't they? 80% say yes. And we do tend to model ourselves in our own image and likeness rather than God. So with this statement, "The greatest among you must be your servant or deacon," Jesus stops us in our tracks. We've heard that said so many times. I wonder if we've really taken it in. And that's why I mentioned the word "deacon," because it is a vocation in the church and married men can apply for it. At present, we don't have the blessing of a permanent married deacon in our parish.

I know a wonderful married deacon - he's 82 now, and retired. A married deacon friend who was my spiritual director for years - Pat - and he was a living symbol of what a deacon is meant to be, that of Christ the servant. He worked in the mental health unit in Dewsbury District Hospital for the last 30 years, and he was so good and so willing to turn out when people were in trouble or difficulty, that the consultants used to call him and say, "We can't calm this person down, will you come?" He was that good. And he, to me, epitomizes this living symbol of what a deacon should be, which is a vocation for all of us. In other words, we're all called to be diakonos or diakonie in a small way. We're all called to that witness of service of which a deacon is an ordained symbol of the Christian's vocation. And so, I just thought I'd read you an extract from the ordination rite of a deacon, because I think it could be a perfect prayer for all of us.

Lord, send forth upon them the Holy Spirit. May they excel in every virtue in love that is sincere, in concern for the sick and the poor, in unassuming authority, in self-discipline, and in holiness of life. May their conduct exemplify your commandments and lead your people to imitate their purity of life. May they remain strong and steadfast in Christ, giving the world the witness of a pure conscience. May they, in this life, imitate your Son who came not to be served but to serve, and one day reign with Him in heaven. I think that could be a meditation every day before you open your mouth to anyone.