

When you read between the lines of what went on in the Gospel account of Jesus teaching in the synagogue, it reminds me of very much of what can happen in today's society regarding our views of class and status. Jesus spoke with authority, and people were amazed, some even resentful. There may have been a hierarchy in His village, and maybe Jesus's family were low in that hierarchy and therefore resented, "How dare he stand up in the synagogue and begin to teach as if he was a rabbi?" There could have been all sorts of issues concerning that society's structures, a sort of, "Who is he?", stepping out of his position. Many of the prophets before Jesus - and we've been listening to Amos all week, were in that same position. Amos was a shepherd and was resented for taking on the role of prophet, and he even said, "I didn't want to become a prophet. This burning within me forced me to do it."

So, we see that the structures of society and Church affect us all very deeply, especially when they're hidden from our immediate view, and there can be a sort of expectation of where our place should be in any structure of society, including the Church.

What I find interesting, despite obviously some historical aberrations, is that the Church has always preached that it is not tied or allied to any one image, structure, ideology, or philosophy dictated by society or present fashionable opinions. All the models on which the Church is meant to function are based solely on Jesus himself. Even the sense of hierarchy, which has been a strong model, hasn't it, especially because of controversy in the past where we think of the Reformation and how the emphasis was put on authority, are based on the life and teachings of Jesus.

Jesus' group of followers was a hierarchical structure. Jesus said, "I do not call you servants anymore but friends," but He was their distinctive leader. This structural hierarchical image has been highly promoted in the Church, because it's an idea that's as old as the hills, and the base on which even today, most organizations, and businesses work. A hierarchy allocates responsibilities, obligations, authority, and direction, and it's a "buck stops here" setup. When a priest comes to a parish, the buck stops with him/ME I suppose, if anything goes wrong. If you look at Canon Law, it's amazing what a parish priest is supposed to do. Thank God none of you read Canon Law! (Laughter). So the first image we get from today's Gospel is hierarchy.

Then there's another image we can take from today's Gospel, we look at Jesus and we think of His pastoral care, His concern for the poor, the underprivileged, the outcast, and directing His disciples, that His church ought to be a Church that became servant to others. The Church has promoted this idea throughout the centuries. In fact, I would say the heyday of the Church's pastoral concern was between the 16th and 19th centuries, with many new religious orders and lay movements springing up to educate and care for the poor and

disadvantaged. The Early Church was pretty good at pastoral care too - reaching out to others in need of the practical love of God.

Of course today the Church is still a major worldwide provider of healthcare and education. You won't see that in the media of course, but in the USA for example, that country of extremes of riches and poverty, the Church is one of the biggest providers of free healthcare and help for all those in poverty. Certainly in Latin America and Africa, the Church is virtually the only organisation upon which the poor can rely. A slight problem with this image of Church, especially at a local level, is that we can see those involved in pastoral care - the helpers and volunteers as special, clever, or holy. It can create its own little aberration of them and us, "Oh, leave it to so-and-so, they always do that," - when of course the obligation to give help and assistance, and to use our talents for the service of others, lies at the heart of all of us who claim the title Christian.

The third image that strikes me from today's Gospel, is that of being missionary. Jesus and His disciples were certainly missionary. They preached that the Kingdom of God was close at hand, reaching out to all, whether they were regarded as sinners or, in society's eyes, beyond the pale. Jesus and His disciples invited people to share a vision of God's inclusive kingdom among us, opening hearts, if you like, to receive God's grace. In this model or image, if we apply it to us, the Church, we should be doing exactly as Jesus did. We all have a role, as members of the Church, in promoting the mission, the call of Jesus to everyone - "Go out to the whole world!" I would say in this missionary model, the Church is ALL of us being the hands and feet of Jesus.

So let us summarize this Gospel and the three images it gives us, in a parish context. In the first image, the hierarchy, the priest is expected to lead upfront - and that's quite right. People expect the priest to provide the sacraments, and to get on with more basic things like repairs and so on. In the second image, the pastoral care church, the priest is, I suppose, expected to coordinate things and ensure that appropriate provision for the needy is in place. But in the last model, and I think this the REAL purpose of a parish, we are all called to be missionary. The priest is part of a collective ownership of responsibility. He becomes a co-pastor with parishioners, empowering parishioners, hopefully, to be stakeholders, visionaries and apostles in the continuing work of God in His Holy Catholic Church.



