

Movies which depict the Mafia, films like *The Godfather* trilogy, *The Untouchables* or *Donnie Brasco*, give important insights into the New Testament world. The villages of Sicily, from where the phenomenon of Cosa Nostra emerged, reflect the village culture of the Mediterranean which has not changed in thousands of years; and the values and priorities, the way of looking at the world, was the same in small town Sicily in the nineteenth century as it was among the Mafia in Chicago and New York in the twentieth century as it was in small town Palestine in the first century.

I've often spoken about the importance of honour in this cultural system. Honour is the core value, and its opposite dishonour, shame, is the most significant dis-value. Everything in this society was ultimately concerned with maintaining or increasing your honour, your dignity. in the eyes of your peers. Another significant factor in the social structure of the Mediterranean world was the system of patronage.

You may remember that in the opening of the *Godfather*, both book and film, various people call on *il padrino*, Don Vito Corleone (Marlon Brando) to ask for favours. He grants them and this ties the supplicants to him. He is now their patron and they his clients. Whenever he wants them to do something for him they must immediately respond. When his son, Sonny, is killed we see him calling in the favours.

This patron-client relationship is typical of life in the Mediterranean world down the ages. The great patron in the first century was the Emperor (Augustus when Jesus was born; Tiberius at the time of his ministry) and everyone in the Empire was his client. They all directly or indirectly paid taxes to him and obeyed his laws. In so doing they showed him respect and increased his honour. He dispensed privileges, jobs and honours and those who benefited repaid him with explicit, visible honour and loyalty. One of the ways of doing this was to leave substantial sums of money to your patron in your will. Herod the Great left Augustus a large amount, part of the 1.4 billion *sesterces* Augustus inherited from grateful clients. Another form of respect was to build and dedicate temples to your patron or put up statues of them. Again Herod the Great did this to honour Augustus.

Many of the Emperor's clients, like Pontius Pilate and Herod Antipas, would be patrons to others and so on down an interlocking web. Some clients would have more than one patron, but woe-betide the client who found himself caught between the competing interests of two of his patrons.

Clients gave their patrons honour, loyalty, service and information, and received favour, help, protection, work.

There is a scene in *Donnie Brasco* where Al Pacino's character, Lefty Ruggiero, is with a crowd of other minor mobsters waiting for the Godfather to arrive at his office. They are there in the hope of work but more importantly they are there to show respect to their patron. Their presence as a welcoming crowd gives him honour,

prestige, a show. This is a scene that could have been played out with appropriate changes of costume in any city of the Roman Empire. In Roman Society patronage took on a very ritualized form. A learned quotation|:"The clients of a Roman patron...were expected to appear every morning at the patron's home to salute the patron, pay deference and find out if there was anything they could do for the patron." (Oakman, 'Palestine in the Time of Jesus' [1988])

Jesus as their rabbi has a sort of patron role to the disciples. He gives them teaching and they are loyal to him. He cannot be a patron in the fullest sense as he cannot confer benefits on them - only the promise of benefits in the world to come (as we heard last week).

He can expect loyalty from his followers. Loyalty though, in this society is vertical. It goes up to the patron; it does not go sideways to one's fellow clients. We see this in the Gospel today. The brothers James and John, who as kinsfolk have a loyalty to each other, happily go behind the backs of the other disciples to try to gain an advantage over them - a better position when Jesus comes in glory. Understandably the others are not pleased with the brothers - and no doubt annoyed with themselves that they hadn't thought of the strategy first. James and John were looking for enhanced prestige and they say they can pay the price for it.

Jesus denies their request because it is not his to give. The best places in the Kingdom are in the gift of the Patron, the heavenly Father, in whose name Jesus is acting as broker. A broker puts clients in touch with patrons, and thus has the clients beholden to him. In time as his web of contacts grows this might enable him to offer patronage instead of brokerage. In the Godfather this role is played by the consiglieri, Don Vito Corleone's counsellor, (Tom Hagen played by Robert Duvall) who acts as go-between bringing people who have particular needs to the man who can help them.

So in this society we have patrons, clients and brokers. And anyone, apart from the Emperor, or the Godfather - the Big Boss, and those low down the scale, can at various times play each of these roles. In Jesus' system, there is only one patron, the heavenly Father; Jesus is the broker who brings people to him. We are all the Father's clients. He asks our loyalty and he promises ultimate protection. But Jesus also changes the accepted order. The way to give, our patron, our Heavenly Father honour is to serve his people, an absurd idea in this culture; and he will pay the ultimate price in his service by dying the death of a slave. Again something which was absurd, incomprehensible in this culture. Moreover, our loyalty is no longer only upwards. It is also horizontal. We are part of a family whose patron is our Father and so we have responsibility for one another. Something the disciples found hard to grasp, until that ultimate price had been paid.