

22nd Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24 B)

October 20, 2024

Holy Family Episcopal Church

Laurel Springs, New Jersey

Mark 10:35-45

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our gospel reading this morning stars the Zebedee brothers; the Sons of Thunder, James and John. These two disciples ask Jesus to do for them whatever they ask. They wanted to sit at his left and right hands. Biblical scholar William Barclay guided me through this encounter between these two disciples and Jesus and offered some insight that I would like to share with you this morning.

It is a very revealing story. It tells us something about the Gospel writer, Mark. This story is also told in the Gospel of Matthew. The difference, however, between the two versions is that in Matthew's version, it is their mother, Salome who makes the request of Jesus. Matthew must have felt that such a request was unworthy of an apostle, and, to save the reputation of James and John, he attributed it to the natural ambition of their mother for her sons. This story shows us the honesty of Mark. It was his aim to show us the disciples with their flaws-ambitions, confusions, and all. Mark was right, because the

Twelve were not a company of saints. They were ordinary men, and it is reassuring to know that it was with people like ourselves that Jesus set out to change the world - and he did.

This story tells us something about James and John. They were ambitious. When the victory over Roman occupation was won and the triumph complete, their goal was to be Jesus' Chief Ministers of State. Maybe their ambition was kindled because more than once Jesus had made them part of his inner circle, the Chosen Three. Maybe they were a little better off than the others; their father was wealthy enough to employ hired servants, and it may be that they rather snobbishly thought that their social superiority entitled them to the first place. Whatever the reason, they showed themselves as men in whose hearts there was ambition for the first place in an earthly kingdom.

This story tells us that they had completely failed to understand Jesus. The amazing thing is not the fact that this incident happened, **but** the time when it happened. It is the juxtaposition of Jesus' most definitive and detailed foretelling of His death and this request that is staggering. It demonstrates, as nothing else could, how little they understood what Jesus was saying to them. Jesus' words were powerless to erase their

idea of a Messiah of earthly power and glory. Only the Cross could do that!

But after we have looked at all the things against James and John, this story tells us one shining thing about them. Confused and bewildered as they might be, they still believed in Jesus. It is amazing that they could still connect glory with a Galilean carpenter who had incurred the enmity, animosity, and bitter opposition and hatred of the orthodox religious leaders and who was apparently heading for crucifixion under the Romans. There is an amazing confidence and also an amazing loyalty here. As misguided as James and John might be, their hearts were in the right place. They never for a second doubted Jesus' ultimate triumph.

This story also reveals to us something of Jesus' standard of greatness. The Revised Standard Version of the Bible gives a literally accurate translation of what Jesus said- "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" Jesus uses two Jewish metaphors here.

It was customary at a royal banquet for the King to hand the cup to his guests. The cup therefore became a metaphor for the life and experience

that God handed out to men and women. ‘My cup overflows’ from Psalm 23 speaks of a life and experience of happiness given God. ‘In hand of the Lord there is a cup,’ from Psalm 75 refers to the fate in store for the wicked and disobedient. Isaiah, thinking of the disasters which had come upon the people of Israel, describes them as having drunk ‘at the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath.’ The cup speaks of the experience allotted to men and women by God.

The other phrase which Jesus uses is actually misleading in the literal English version. He speaks of the baptism with which he is baptized. The Greek verb **baptizein** means “to dip” Its past participle means “submerged” and its common usage is “being submerged in any experience.” This word is regularly used for a ship that has been wrecked and submerged beneath the waves. The metaphor is very closely related to a metaphor which the Psalmist often uses. In Psalm 42:7 we read, “All your waves and your billows have gone over me” and in Psalm 124:4 we read, “Then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us.” The expression as Jesus used it here, has nothing to do with the technical baptism. What he is saying is,

“Can you bear to go through the terrible experience which I have to go through? Can you face being submerged in hatred, pain, and death, as I must be?”

He was telling these two disciples that without the cross there can never be a crown. The standard of greatness in the kingdom of God is the standard of the cross. It is true that in the days to come they did go through the experience of their master, for James was beheaded by Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:2), and, though John was probably not martyred, he suffered much for Christ. They accepted the challenge of their Master- even if they did so blindly.

Jesus told them that the ultimate issue of things belonged to God. The final assignment of destiny was his prerogative. Jesus never usurped the place of God. His whole life was one long act of submission to God's will, even to the very end, and he knew that in the end God's will was supreme.

Mark's Gospel points those of us who wish to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, the Son of God to the Cross. We are to see in the cross a mirror that reflects our true image. The image of who we are reflects the image of what we are; the image of love incarnate that serves the world, the image of Christ. May God the Father, his Son our Lord, and the Holy Spirit help us to remember who we are and whose we are and to act accordingly. Amen.