



Pentecost 22 – Proper 24 (B)

To Follow Christ

[RCL]: Isaiah 53:4-12; Psalm 91:9-16; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.

Beginning in Mark 8:22 and continuing to the end of chapter 10, we find Jesus making his way to Jerusalem. The narrative is bracketed by the healing of two blind men: one in Bethsaida, and the other, Bartimeus, outside the gates of Jericho. Both seem to represent those, like many of the demons in Mark, who recognize who Jesus is immediately, so unlike the disciples, who almost never do.

The pivotal question throughout the saga of this journey is the one Jesus puts to the disciples just after the first blind man recovers his sight. After first asking the twelve who people are saying he is, he puts the question directly to them, and in turn to all of us: “Who do you say that I am?” Peter appears to be on the right track, answering, “You are the Christos, the anointed, the Messiah.” Jesus orders them “not to tell anyone about him,” and goes on to teach them that it is necessary that the Son of Man suffer many things, be rejected, and be killed, and after three days rise. Peter objects, to which Jesus replies, “Get out of my sight, Satan, you don’t judge things the way God does, but the way people do.” This was the first time he spoke plainly to them about what would happen when they got to Jerusalem.

Just before our episode with James and John, Jesus tells them for a third time, “The Son of Man will be handed over to the high priests, be condemned to death, and they will hand him over to the Gentiles – that is, the Roman occupational forces. The Romans will mock him, spit on him, flog him, and kill him. After three days he will rise.” Again, Jesus speaks plainly to them, that it is the Gentiles, the Empire of Caesar, Rome, who will kill him.

It is then and there that the Brothers Zebedee, James and John, a couple of fishermen, walk up to Jesus and say, “Uh, Teacher, whatever we ask, you have to do it, okay?” Jesus asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” They reply, “Uh, okay. Give us this: in your glory, one of us sits on your right, and one of us on

your left. Okay?” Jesus replies, “You have no idea what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink? Or the baptism I must undergo, are you able to take that, too?”¹

It helps to understand that in the Psalms and prophetic literature, “the cup” means to indicate the fate that lies ahead of a person, which Jesus has three times tried to make clear. And he is not referring to the baptism of John, nor Christian baptism, but rather invokes a common biblical metaphor in which trials and dangers that lie ahead are going to be like passing through turbulent and stormy waters. What we today might call a “baptism by fire.” Confronting the Roman Empire is not going to go well. Jesus has just asked them if they, too, are ready to endure that which he has made clear now for the fourth time, rendering their response at best ironic, and even laughable: “Sure, we can do that. No problem!”

Yet, surprisingly, rather than chastising them, Jesus affirms their declaration: “Yes, you will drink the same cup, and yes, you will face a baptism of fire, but sitting on my right and left is not for me to say. It belongs only to those for which it was prepared by my Father. Please understand, there is not going to be an immediate and happy ending. I’m not going to emerge as some imperial potentate with absolute power over all the world. I will suffer, as I have said, and I will surrender my future into the hands of God my Father, in whose power, mercy, love, forgiveness, and generosity I have complete trust.”

Before James and John can say anything else, the ten remaining disciples are angered by the brothers’ preemptive strike for sharing in what they perceive will be Christ’s power and glory. Glory throughout the Bible refers first to God’s aura of splendor, power, and sovereignty, often understood as God’s presence in Israel as a brightness of light that shines visibly, as when he had guided the people out of Egypt and through the wilderness sojourn. And any person, like Jesus, who might share in God’s glory is considered a person of significant “weightiness, power, influence, prestige, and gravitas.”² This is what the brothers want for themselves.

Realizing once and for all the need to spell out the misunderstanding of what it’s going to be like once they are in Jerusalem, Jesus says, “You know that the ones who seem to rule over the Gentiles, like Rome, like Babylon, like Egypt, lord it over them. Their *great ones* push them around. It is not to be that way with you! On the contrary: You want to be great? Wait on tables. Serve others. You want to be in first place? Become everyone’s slave. The Son of Man, after all, did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life, a ransom worth many people.”

Ransom, he says, as opposed to sacrifice, signifies a price paid to liberate people from some kind of bondage. When he says, “many people,” this is a Semitic idiom that does not mean, “many people, but not all,” but rather is inclusive. That is, it does not mean that many are saved, but some are not, but between the many and the one that acts on their behalf, all will be liberated.³

¹ For the following excerpts of the text in Mark 10:35-45, the author was guided by the translation of Richard W. Swanson in his book, “Provoking the Gospel of Mark” (Pilgrim Press, Cleveland: 2005) p. 303-305.

² Brueggemann, Walter, “Reverberations of Faith” (Westminster-John Knox Press, Louisville: 2002) p. 87-89.

³ Byrne, Brendan, “A Costly Freedom” (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota:2008) p. 169, n. 61.

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What begins with Jesus' attempt to counter the disciples' blind ambition becomes instead the most profound interpretation of just what his death in Jerusalem means for the community of those of us who wish to follow him. Father Brendan Byrne, an Australian Jesuit and biblical commentator, sums it up like this: The statement that concludes this episode “grounds the community’s exercise of authority as ‘service’ on nothing less than the redemptive action of Christ. If James and John and the other ten disciples – and indeed all who would be disciples – wish to enter into and share Jesus’s glory, the only ‘way’ is to follow him in the self-sacrificing service of humanity that will have its high point of concentration on the cross.”⁴

We do well to acknowledge that the Church has, throughout history, vacillated between the blind ambition and presumed power sought by James and John, and believing that to serve Christ as he serves the world is perfect freedom. We must look back at eras like the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the Holocaust as times when we were like James, John, and the ten and acted in ways contrary to the Way of Christ, which is the Way of the Cross. Fortunately, there have been examples of those like Lawrence, Deacon of Rome, Deitrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King, Jr., who have shown us the way of service to ransom the lives of many.

It is no coincidence that the lessons from Isaiah and Hebrews today are also included in the lectionary for Good Friday, to which this entire section of Mark’s Gospel points those of us who wish to be faithful in following Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 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.⁵ 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.

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⁴ Ibid., Byrne, p. 169.

⁵ Delio, Ilia, “The Primacy of Love” (Fortress Press, Minneapolis:2022) p. 49-50.