

SERVANT OF ALL

Pentecost 22 Year B

Job 38:1-7, (34-41); Ps 104:1-9,24,35c; Heb 5:1-10; Mk 10:35-45 Gladstone
21/10/2018

The principal of a very prominent high school was surprised by the phone call. It came from an inmate at a nearby prison who had made a considerable fortune by illegal means—as you can well imagine. Now the man was offering to make a significant donation to the school.

In return for his donation, the inmate wanted the high school to make it possible for his now adult son, a high school dropout, to receive a high school diploma. As the principal inquired further, it became clear that the inmate did not want his son to have to do anything to actually earn the diploma. He simply wanted his son to be sent a diploma in the mail.

The principal was flabbergasted. Why, she asked the inmate, did he care so much that his son, now in business for himself, should receive his diploma?

“Because,” the inmate replied, “education is important!”

This man was something like James and John, the ambitious brothers in today’s reading from Mark’s account of the gospel, who wanted the crown but not the cross. Actually, they were so ignorant of what kind of messiah Jesus had come to be—a crucified messiah—that they didn’t really know what they were asking. Ironically, they would indeed die martyrs’ deaths: at least James would—tradition says that John lived to be a very old man, but he, too, would know suffering.

The disciples were traveling with Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. At the beginning of the journey, Jesus healed a blind man whose “sight was restored, and (he) saw everyone clearly” (8:22-26). Interestingly enough, during the journey, Jesus’ disciples seemed unable to see anything clearly.

Three times, Jesus had predicted his impending death:

- After the first prediction, Peter rebuked him (8:31-33), only to be rebuked in return. Jesus then proceeded to teach the crowd and the disciples, “Whoever wants to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (8:34).

- After the second prediction, the disciples argued about who was greatest (9:34), following which Jesus taught them that “If any man wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all” (9:35).
- Between the second and third predictions, Jesus tells the disciples, ³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” (10:31).
- Now, immediately prior to the passage we’re looking at this morning, Jesus has just predicted his death for the third and final time. “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; ³⁴they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.” (Mark 10:33-34).

Unfortunately, like clockwork, this is also the third time the disciples subsequently demonstrate a wholesale inability to grasp what Jesus was saying. As they got continually closer to Jerusalem, Jesus had been getting more and more graphic in trying to convey to the disciples the true nature of his kingdom and what discipleship in this kingdom really meant.

And *still* they didn’t get it.

If you were to read through Mark’s gospel, you would, even as a reader, be getting a little bit tired of this by now. Jesus tells the disciples what’s in store for him and what do we get from James and John? Angling for cabinet posts in the new Jesus Administration. You can almost see the big cartoon bubble over the top of Jesus’ head containing just one word: ****SIGH****

“Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptised with?” Of all the questions Jesus ever asked, this one deserved a careful, sober answer. It’s not a question to answer too quickly. Unless, that is, you happen to think like James and John. They answered Jesus’ question with a very quick, “You bet we can!” Now, that’s the kind of answer you give when you picture the “cup” in question to be a bejewelled golden goblet filled with good wine at the feast of Jesus’ inauguration as the replacement for the Caesar. Rather, the “cup” that Jesus was referring to was the one he spoke of in the Garden of Olives—a cup of suffering: “Father, let this cup pass; but if it cannot pass and I must drink it—thy will be done” (Mt. 26:39).

And the baptism Jesus spoke of is not the one we received when water is poured over our heads. Jesus uses the word as a figure of speech to encompass the sufferings he would go through in his passion—as we might speak of a baptism by fire. The apostles could not know what he was speaking of, but they, nonetheless, brashly affirmed they could do these things.

They were ignorant of what they were saying. Even so, Jesus, continues to be gentle with them as he takes up another tack. “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

The story doesn’t end here, however. It didn’t take long before Bartholomew or Matthew or someone else said to the other disciples, “Did you hear what James and John just asked Jesus about!?” So Jesus gathered them together and says, “You just don’t get it, do you? Do you think that my ministry is about nothing more than merely re-treading the business-as-usual power plays of the rest of the world? Have I ever seemed interested in Roman-like power and privilege? I am all about servanthood. I came to serve not be served, and so if it’s greatness you’re looking for in the kingdom that’s coming, you’d all better start grasping for the bottom-most rung of the ladder!”

We find it hard to imagine how James and John could be so dense—so uncaring. We wonder how they could possibly “not get it” by this time. Their request is wrong because they’re asking Jesus to fit into their plans rather than trying to see how they might fit into Jesus’ plans. James and John have not only failed to hear Jesus’ prediction of his upcoming death, but they regard this journey to Jerusalem as a messianic march on the city to restore its former Davidic glory so that Jesus might assume the Davidic throne.

It’s difficult for us to understand how James and John—how any of the disciples—could fail to hear Jesus’ clear prediction of his passion—except that we see Christians today doing exactly the same thing—hearing what they want to hear instead of listening to Jesus’ words about cross-bearing:

The Prosperity Gospel, with its appeal to believe and grow rich, teaches that Jesus wants us to prosper—to go first class—to wear a Rolex and to drive a Mercedes. How can anyone so misunderstand Jesus? How can they fail to hear his teaching about cross-bearing, service and sacrifice?

If we examine our own prayers, we'll find much that parallels the request of these two brothers. Is the emphasis of our prayers adoration and praise? Thanksgiving? Confession? For most of us, prayer consists primarily of asking—Lord, give me this and Lord, give me that. Our prayers are often not so different from this request of James and John. I know that one member of a congregation, where I was minister, actually left our congregation because she didn't like us praying a prayer of confession every week.

Jesus did not rebuke James and John, and he does not rebuke the twelve. Instead, he uses their behaviour as a springboard for teaching. He instructs them about the kingdom of God—its rules—how it works.

In the kingdom of God, honours will go to those who serve, rather than to those who exact service from others. First prize will go to the slave or "bond-servant", who was inferior even to a servant. In ancient society they were the last and least of all. The idea of slave being first is as absurdly paradoxical as a camel going through the eye of a needle (v. 25).

But, we should be careful not to judge the disciples too harshly for their failure to understand. We have the advantage of any number of stories in the Gospels that teach us to honour service rather than power, but we often fail to do so.

Being his disciples is not about position and authority and power. It's about service. The greatest among them will be the one who serves and Jesus says even he, the Son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. It's ultimately in the giving of his life that Jesus reorders the relationship between God and people—an act of self sacrifice and generosity by God to include people within his kingdom. God serves humanity and the whole creation.

This is what it means to be a follower of Jesus—not claims at power and authority, but the serving of others. It's a mindset which the disciples really struggled with and it is mindset that we no less struggle with. How do we see our lives as serving others not simply gaining benefits for ourselves? Is our faith about the rewards we get or the service we give?

To Jesus Christ, the servant of all, be glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.