

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

Our story begins today on the road to Jerusalem. Jesus is walking ahead of His disciples. A little way behind Him, the brothers, James and John are walking but also talking rather furtively to one another. And even farther back from them, the rest of the disciples are walking and talking.

Keep in mind the rather informal hierarchy among the disciples. It is now pretty well accepted that James was the chief apostle. He would later become the head of the church in Jerusalem and often served as a mediator when the disciples got into arguments, such as in Acts 15 when Peter and Paul get into it. John was his younger brother. They had been disciples of John the Baptist but had now been followers for Jesus for about 18 months.

Peter had seniority in the group, having been a disciple the longest. But his temper, sometimes fisherman's coarse language and readiness to fight had kept him out of the leadership position.

Peter, James, and John were Jesus' inner circle. On several occasions, including the transfiguration and the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus has these three accompany him to the exclusion of the other disciples.

As they round a bend in the road where the group of ten disciples is temporarily out of sight, James and John run up to Jesus to ask Him a question.

"Teacher, we want you to do us a favor" they tell Jesus.

"What do you want me to do for you?," Jesus asks.

Last week we read an exchange between Peter and Jesus about leaving everything and following Him. Jesus ends that discussion by telling Peter that. "Many who are first will end up last, and the last first." (v. 31). Some scholars see this as an implied rebuke against Peter and believe that James and John are taking that criticism as an opportunity to gain an advantage over Peter. Whatever their motivation, it is clear that

these brothers are seeking the two highest places of honor and have no room in their scenario to include Peter.

The Zebedee brothers ask Jesus “When you sit on your glorious throne, we want to sit in places of honor next to you, one on your right and the other on your left.” We have all seen enough of the work of that great Biblical scholar, Cecil B DeMille, to know that in that time and place, people usually reclined on couches around a low table to eat at banquets or feasts. When James and John request to sit at Jesus’ right and left hands in His glory, they are imagining Jesus as a king sitting at a table with his chief advisors at His side. They still don’t get it. Just a short time ago (back up in verses 33-34), Jesus tells them that He is going to Jerusalem to die. But they still are thinking in terms of a military victory. Jesus is going to Jerusalem to stomp out the Romans and to ascend the throne of David and they want to be a part of that victory. It would be much later that they will come to understand Jesus’ “glory,” His victory has to do with His Passion, His suffering, His dying.

It would be difficult for us to understand how James and John could fail to hear Jesus’ clear prediction of His passion – except that we see Christians today hearing what they want to hear in the teachings of the Bible. They hear what they want instead of listening to Jesus’ words.

The Prosperity Gospel is a good example. It comes along with its appeal to believe and grow rich. It tells us that Jesus wants us to prosper – to go first class – to make the most money, to enjoy the latest gadgets and to drive the most fashionable cars. Somehow, this is difficult to align with the words of Jesus about cross-bearing, service, and sacrifice.

But let’s be honest. If we examine our own prayers, don’t we find that sometimes our prayers are similar to the request of these two brothers? Is the emphasis of our prayers on adoration and praise? Thanksgiving? Confession? For many Christians, prayer consists primarily of asking – Lord, give me this and Lord, give me that, and Lord, do this or that. Our prayers may not be so different from the request of James and John.

But, Jesus does not reprimand James and John. Instead, He asks them “Are you sure that is what you want?”

“You have no idea what you're asking. Are you capable of drinking the cup I drink, of being baptized in the baptism I'm about to be plunged into?” Jesus asks. “Sure,” they said. “Why not?” In the Old Testament, the cup could refer to blessings or it could refer to judgment and punishment. James and John know that Jesus has challenged them and accept the challenge -- not understanding the consequences. Later, when Jesus is arrested, they won't be so brave. Mark tells us, “All of (Jesus' disciples) deserted him and fled” and that included James and John.

“You shall indeed drink the cup that I drink, and you shall be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with.” It is not certain that Jesus is predicting martyrdom for these brothers. His words also make sense if they point to persecution rather than death.

William Barclay notes that the Greek verb βαπτισθήαι (baptisthenai: be baptized) means to dip or to be submerged and does not always refer to water. For instance, a grieving person might be described as being submerged in sorrow. While James and John are thinking of the cup and baptism as wonderful blessings, Jesus knows that their request will involve pain, sacrifice, and maybe even death. It is these that He promises to share with James and John.

James was, in fact, martyred by Herod Agrippa in 44 CE. John's fate is less certain. At least one source reports his martyrdom, but another reports his death in Ephesus around 100 CE. Acts 4 tells of his arrest in Jerusalem. Whether he was martyred or not, we can assume that his was not an easy life.

But I want to go back to the boys' request for a moment. Asking to sit on the right hand of Jesus is a pretty powerful request. They are not asking to be a part of the Kingdom that Jesus is going to set up; they are asking that one of them function in a very special role. The position on the right hand of the king was a position that denoted authority, and sovereignty. I am reminded of the story of Joseph back in Genesis. We'll not retell the story again but remember that after Joseph had done all he did for the Pharaoh, we are told in Genesis 41:45, the Pharaoh gave Joseph “authority over the land of Egypt.”

He became Pharaoh's right-hand man. (The right hand again.) If we look a little deeper at this story, we can discover something that adds weight to what James and John are asking. In the Egyptian pantheon of gods, the Pharaoh was one of the highest. He was not a man; he was a god. Now, Joseph is suddenly the number two man, second only to the god of the land. So, if we move this over to a later time period, the term that would be used here is that Joseph became Pharaoh's high priest. He isn't a Prime Minister; that is governmental. We are talking about a god here. That is basically what James and John are asking for one of them. They want to be the high priest in Jesus' new kingdom.

Jesus ask them basically are you sure you want the job? Let's look for a moment , at the duties of a high priest. That is what we heard in Hebrews 5 this morning. The high priest has several functions. First, the priest is to offer gifts and sacrifices. There were several types of sacrifices the high priest was responsible for: Burnt offering, Grain offering, Peace offering, Sin offering, and Guilt offering are a few of the main sacrifices.

Secondly, the priest is to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward. The word "ignorant" is the Greek word *ἀγνοέω* (agnoeo) - not to know, from which we get our word agnostic. It is someone who doesn't know something and consequently makes mistakes out of their lack of knowledge. The word "wayward" refers to people who have been deceived and deliberately led astray by someone else. And, how are they to deal with these people? With gentleness, with moderation, the word has implied within it the concept of suffering in silence. You don't pull your hair out; you don't yell, you smile and work gently with the flock.

Next, a high priest has to recognize their own weakness and sins and be constantly seeking forgiveness and direction for their own conduct. The high priest has to recognize that they are human too. They have to recognize that theirs is a position of service.

James and John are seeing the spotlight part of being a high priest, not the actual work. They are seeing the robes, the bells, all the trappings of the position. Do you think they would have asked what they did if they understood the actual work of a high priest? Do

you think that they would have asked for this if they understood that being a priest is being a servant, a servant of the people before God?

Maybe that is why Jesus, instead of scolding them, says “Ok, go ahead. You asked for it.” But even then, He still tries to warn them.

About this time, the other ten catches up with them and hear part of this dialogue. They get mad at James and John. The disciples felt that they are all in contention for this place of honor, and James and John are trying to steal the prize from under their noses. Jesus says, wait a minute. “You've observed how godless rulers throw their weight around," he said, "and when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It's not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not to be served - and then to give away his life in exchange for many who are held hostage.”

We should be careful not to judge the disciples too harshly for their failure to understand and be drawn to the glitz and glamor of life. We have the Gospels that teach us to honor service rather than power, but we often fail to do so. We stand in awe of Hollywood stars and sports figures, even though many of them use their considerable influence to promote violence, illicit sex, drugs, and vulgarity. We envy corporate moguls who get rich by increasing short-term profits, often at the expense of laid-off employees – and who, when their actions produce long-term ruin, bail out, protected by golden parachutes. We elect politicians who sell their souls to special interests and who spend their lives shading the truth to serve their personal interests.

Jesus calls us to a different ideal, telling us that God honors service rather than power. He challenges us to begin living by Kingdom Rules in the here-and-now. It is a tough sell – and a lesson that the church must continually re-learn. Every denomination, congregation, and pastor is tempted to look out for Number One instead of serving kingdom needs. We are tempted by grand titles, vestments, and churches – tempted to preach the word that sells instead of the faithful word. Personal ambition did not start with James and John, nor did it end with them.

Does Jesus get upset or angry with the disciples because they are looking out for themselves? Does He question their motives? No, He uses the opportunity to teach them a basic truth about being His follower. While the rewards are great, the journey is not always a pleasant one. Remember the list of sacrifices offered by the high priest? There was one missing. Over in Hebrews 13:15, we are told that we should also be “pouring out sacrificial praises from our lips to God in Jesus' name.” How can praise be a sacrifice? The common thread in all the sacrifices is that they cost the giver something. When would praise cost us something? When we don't feel the need to praise. When life is going all wrong. When the children are sick, the car is broken, the bills are past due, somebody at church is spreading gossip, the boss brings you extra work that needs to be done at 4:50, those are the times that praise becomes a sacrifice and the very times that we should be praising. Not praising the situation but praising the God who helps us rise above the situation.

James and John, Peter, Andrew, Bartholomew, Philip, Matthew, all of the disciples learned about sacrificial praise. And it all started when the brothers said they had something that they wanted Jesus to do for them. This morning, what are you asking Jesus to do in your life? Are you ready for the consequences? Are you ready for an answer that is far beyond anything you imagined? Are you ready to begin offering your sacrifices of praise?