

OCTOBER 18TH, 2015: TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 53:10-11 Hebrews 4:14-16 Mark 10:35-45

It's been over a month since we've heard the second of Mark's three predictions of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. Finally, we have the third. Following the same pattern of the previous two, it begins with the prediction - which for some reason has been omitted in today's liturgical reading - then is quickly followed by a misunderstanding of what it means to die, then concludes with Jesus clarifying the issue.

In chapter 8, it's Peter who has a problem dying with Jesus; the Twelve follow suite in chapter 9. Here, in chapter 10, the honor goes to James and John. Totally missing Jesus' point about first dying then rising, the brothers foolishly ask to be given the "glory seats" when he comes into his glory.

Mark's Jesus initially cuts them down by simply replying, "You do not know what you are asking" But then, when the other ten "become indignant" at the brothers' request, he clarifies what dying with him actually entails. In the first prediction/misunderstanding/clarification pericope, dying revolved around being open to whatever God asks of us; in the second, accepting even the community's most insignificant members as being important. Here, in the third, he takes us our dying one step further.

"You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you." Then he outlines his dream of an authority structure which completely turns all other such structures upside-down.

"Whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." In Jesus' ideal community, the persons who serve others are more important than the people who are served.

We must always remember that there were "real" slaves during the historical Jesus and the evangelist's day and age. What we today regard as symbolic or metaphorical language was looked at quite differently 2,000 years ago. Slaves back then were expected to give themselves totally over to their masters. Their lives revolved around being at the beck and call of others. Jesus not only demands the same of his followers, he even goes beyond that by mentioning that he regards himself as a "ransom" for many.

When I ask my students, "What's a ransom worth?" they normally respond, "Whatever the person being ransomed is worth." I presume a kidnapper would expect to get more for Pope Francis than for the pastor of Renault. That means that Jesus - and his imitators - gauge their value by the value of those they serve. If we're important, it's only because we serve important people.

The prophet Deutero-Isaiah seems to have been the first biblical person to come up with this idea of "vicarious suffering:" the belief that one person can suffer for another. His disciples, in today's Fourth Song of the Suffering Servant, reflect on that phenomenon. ". . . Through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt shall he bear."

It's not clear how such vicarious suffering works, but as we hear in our Hebrew's pericope, some of Jesus' earliest disciples regarded his death and resurrection as exemplifying such an action. Just as the Jewish high priest offered sacrifices for the people, so Jesus - one of us - offered himself for us. As Deutero-Isaiah's followers expressed it, "By his wounds we're healed."

Jesus, like the prophet, had more than the smell of the sheep on him. He actually took on their sins. There's no way we can more deeply serve others.

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OCTOBER 25TH, 2015: THIRTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 31:7-9 Hebrews 5:1-6 Mark 10:46-52

One of the keys for understanding Mark's message in today's gospel pericope is that his Jesus only twice asks someone, "What do you want me to do for you?" Here, and in last weekend's reading. We saw that James and John's response to his question wasn't the one other Christs should make. Today's response from Bartimaeus is much more appropriate.

From the very beginning of the passage, the evangelist depicts the blind beggar as doing what individuals called by Jesus should do. First, he's persistent in demanding Jesus "take pity" on him, even in the face of the crowd's objections. Second, he immediately responds to Jesus' call by throwing aside his cloak, springing up, and hastening to him. I presume his discarded cloak - probably his only possession - didn't hit the ground. Someone else would have grabbed and kept it. Neither does he check his appointment calendar to determine what day and time he can meet with Jesus. Nothing stands in his way. At this point, he's Mark's example of a perfect disciple.

So - in contrast to last week's pericope - how does the perfect disciple respond to Jesus' question, "What do you want me to do for you?" It's a simple, "Master, I want to see." True disciples don't ask for the glory seats, for high positions in the community, nor for as easy life. They just want to see what God and the risen Jesus want them to do.

Notice Jesus' response. He doesn't say, "I restore your sight." Against expectations, he assures the blind beggar that it doesn't take a miracle to receive the sight to know God's will. Disciples of Jesus already possess what's necessary to clearly see what God wants. "Go your way; your faith has saved you." Those who accept Jesus' value system as their own will know in what direction God expects them to go.

It's no accident that Mark ends his three prediction/misunderstanding/clarification passages with the observation that Bartimaeus "followed behind him on the way." Mark's next passage describes Jesus' Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem. He has less than a week to live. This particular "way" leads to the suffering, death and resurrection which all Jesus' followers are expected to experience.

Now Jesus' command "Get behind me, Satan!" to the befuddled Peter back in chapter 8 makes much more sense. Unlike Bartimaeus, the perfect disciple, Peter isn't content to follow behind Jesus. He stands in front of him and tells him how he should "do it." We only know how to imitate another by going behind him or her, not by standing in front of them. That's how we learn to live the faith Jesus demands.

The unknown author of the Letter to the Hebrews couldn't agree more. That seems to be why he emphasizes the historical Jesus becoming one with all of us. He doesn't expect us to become God. He simply believes that we're called to imitate the faith and actions of another human being. Just as the Jewish high priest was "taken from among humans," so Jesus was also taken from among us. He did what any of us - with his help - is capable of doing. But, as with Bartimaeus, it all revolves around seeing what Jesus sees.

Even Jeremiah, active 600 years before Jesus, understood that faith helps us perceive what others ignore. He's able to see Yahweh bringing 8th century BCE Israelite exiles back from Assyria, though such a return hadn't formally taken place. Such faith constantly perceives a caring God acting as a parent with God's family, even when a majority of people never seem to notice such loving characteristics.

If we're not seeing individuals and situations with different, loving eyes, we're really not following close behind Jesus.

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