

OCTOBER 21ST, 2018: TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

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

Finally, Mark's third prediction/misunderstanding/clarification passage.

This time James and John are given the honor of completely misunderstanding Jesus' insistence on dying and rising with him. Their request isn't complicated: "Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left." They simply lust after prominent places in the glorified Jesus' kingdom.

We teachers learn in Education 101 never to tell a student, "You're too dumb to even know what question to ask." Yet that's exactly how Jesus answers the overly-ambitious brothers. They're clearly on the wrong road. They can't get to where Jesus is unless they turn around and restart their faith journey.

The third way of dying with Jesus is the most difficult to achieve. It'll turn our world upside down. "Whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all." I always remind my students that when the historical Jesus says these words, he lives in a culture in which real slaves exist. He's not speaking metaphorically. Slaves are at least three or four steps below the social ladder.

He employs only one argument for such a drastic turnabout: himself. "For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." He's certain this upside-down lifestyle will bring life to his followers; it's already brought life to him. A ransom is worth nothing in itself. Its value comes from the value of the person being ransomed. Should someone hold me for ransom, I presume he or she could get no more than a dollar fifty on a good day. Should they hold the pope, I'm certain they'd demand and get a few dollars more. Unbelievably, Jesus is telling us his value is determined not by his personal worth but by the value of the people he serves. He's important only because they're important.

As the author of Hebrews' high priest, Jesus is to be praised not because God created him without sin, but because Jesus lowered himself to become one with us, in spite of our sins. Hard to explain to two brothers who only have their eyes focused on the glory seats.

In a similar way, the disciples of Deutero-Isaiah, who composed the fourth song of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh, are convinced their mentor provided them with an image of greatness most people would instantly reject. This unnamed prophet "justified many" through his infirmity and afflictions, not through his strength and victories. No wonder the earliest followers of Jesus frequently read Deutero-Isaiah's four songs. It was akin to looking into the eyes of Jesus.

With all the words of Christian saints and heroes which adorn the walls of our churches I've yet to see seven that are at the heart of both the historical and risen Jesus' faith: "It shall not be so among you!" Our gospels – along with all Scripture – weren't written and saved in order to give people faith. They were composed to help people understand the faith they already had. That means, when someone picked up Mark's scroll and began to read his third prediction/misunderstanding/clarification passage, they had already tried to die with Jesus. That experience alone set them apart from others around them. They look at reality through completely different eyes.

That's why those seven words should always be emblazoned in a conspicuous place where Jesus' followers gather. The temptation is always present for us to judge our actions against the value systems the world provides. If we cave in to those systems, we'll never die enough to completely change the world in which we live.

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OCTOBER 28TH, 2018: THIRTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

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

Today's gospel passage should be read immediately following last week's gospel. Mark certainly intended them to be read together. Both are essential for correctly appreciating his last prediction/misunderstanding/clarification pericope. Jesus has just informed James and John that they have to give themselves so generously to others that they actually become their ransom. At that point he encounters Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, and, for the time being, wraps up this "dying thing."

Mark wants us to zero in on being called. (The word is used three times in two verses.) Bartimaeus is the evangelist's perfect example of a called Christian: he instantly leaves everything (his cloak), springs up and hastens to Jesus, who asks him the same question he just asked James and John. "What do you want me to do for you?"

We heard the consequences when the brothers selfishly asked for the glory seats. But now how does a "perfect" disciple respond to the same question? Bartimaeus' request is a simple, "Master, I want to see." Mark seems to believe that brief prayer should constantly be on the lips of every Christian. What does the risen Christ want us to see, who does he/she want us to help, how are we to specifically help others? Just as Deutero-Isaiah prays every morning to hear, Bartimaeus prays to see.

Jesus' response to the beggar's request is quite significant. He doesn't directly cure Bartimaeus' blindness. Bartimaeus already has the wherewithal to see. "Go your way;" Jesus commands, "your faith has saved you." Our faith provides us with the sight the risen Jesus wants us to have. Our faith helps us see what Jesus sees.

The last verse of the passage is also quite significant. "Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus on the way." The way to where? Mark's next pericope is "Palm Sunday!" Bartimaeus is following behind Jesus to Jerusalem — to his suffering, death and resurrection. Remember in the first narrative of this series, Jesus tells Simon, "Get behind me, Satan." In other words, "Be a 'go-behinder,' instead of an obstacle to my ministry!" Finally, after three chapters, in this blind beggar we have the perfect other Christ, a person who actually follows in the footsteps of his mentor.

Mark's Jesus tells us how to actually achieve the salvation Jeremiah hopes for in our first reading. Not only will the Chosen People eventually return from exile, but everyone will rejoice in Yahweh's parental care. Sharing the faith of Jesus of Nazareth, these outcasts will be saved only when we personally become one with them.

Yet, as the author of Hebrews reminds us, this Galilean carpenter didn't push his own agenda, he gave himself over to God's agenda. Adopting the Hebrew Scriptures' imagery of the Jerusalem high priest, the writer emphasizes Jesus' humanity. Though Jesus did superhuman things, he was just as fragile as the human priest who alone entered the Holy of Holies. In some sense, he had to get "his own act together" before he could help others. God achieved the actual salvation. In the Hebrews author's theology, Jesus, like the Jewish high priest, was just God's instrument to bring it about.

No matter what Christian theology we personally find most helpful, nothing can supplant the giving of ourselves for one another. Such self-giving can't be replaced by making a novena, having a Mass said for someone, or even paying for the education of a priest. It's our responsibility to respond to the needs of those around us. If we're going to spend our lives following behind Jesus, we'd best make certain we can see the road. Only our faith can help us do that. But when the path gets a little hazy, we can always let Bartimaeus be our guide.