

Mark 10:35-45

³⁵James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." ³⁶And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" ³⁷And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." ³⁸But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?" ³⁹They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptised, you will be baptised; ⁴⁰but 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." ⁴¹When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴²So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognise as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

As we begin today's Gospel lesson we join Jesus and his followers as they head toward Jerusalem for the last time. Jesus is walking ahead of them all by himself. They are 'amazed' and 'afraid', according to Mark. It seems clear that everyone in Jesus' company senses that something dire is just down the road; To make things worse, Jesus takes the twelve aside and repeats for the third time his prophecy of death and resurrection: "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; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." The first time he predicts his death, Peter tells him to cut it out and Jesus says, "Get behind me Satan." The second time he makes the prediction, Mark tells us that they did not understand what he was saying and then they proceed to argue amongst themselves who is the greatest.

This time Jesus seems well aware that the time is rapidly approaching that he is on the way to the dreadful *exodus* spoken of by Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration and he is not cool about it: in addition to foreseeing the pain, he knows full well that practically nobody — hardly

any of his disciples and certainly none of his fellow countrymen — will be able to make head nor tail of it.

What happens next proves him right: James and John come to Jesus and ask that they be granted the privilege of sitting on his right hand and on his left in glory. This is so bizarre. It strains believability that Jesus' disciples, having just heard him predict his death, could so completely gloss over what he said and go blathering on about heavenly seating arrangements.

But if you remember how well Jesus knows his disciples: he is certain that they do not understand a thing about what he is really doing. That makes the bizarreness of their request perfectly understandable. They are amazed and they are afraid. They are out of their depth completely. So just as Peter at the transfiguration burst out with the first plausible, let's-get-hold-of-ourselves idea that came into his head (remember his suggestion "let's make three tents. . .") James and John want to put as much distance between themselves and the awful Main Subject, the approaching death of Jesus. "Let's talk about something more cheerful," they say, hoping to cheer up Jesus as well in the process; "let's talk about what it will be like when this is all over."

When the kingdom comes, James and John want to sit as close to Jesus as they can, and while this may be an example of gross ambition on their part, it may also be a case of profound faith. They absolutely believe that Jesus will reign. In spite of his dire predictions, in spite of the storm clouds gathering on the horizon ahead of them, they are so sure of Jesus' final victory that they sign up to go with him.

This is not unreasonable, since they have been his chief assistants from the start. Along with Peter, they are Jesus' closest friends, the ones he takes with him when he leaves the others at home. So it is natural for them to want to stay near him and they seem willing to do whatever it takes.

However, Jesus will not be jollied. He asks them if they are able to drink the cup that he drinks or to be baptised with the baptism which which he is baptised. And when, predictable, they say, "Sure," he lets out a long,

resigned breath and says “O . . . kay; because that will be exactly what you will get. I’m into death and resurrection here, and that’s all I’m into. The business of who gets what seats is not my job.”

James and John seem to believe that the new world will be set up just like the old one only with new leadership in place. The bad guys at the head table will be removed, their chairs will be fumigated and God’s new crew will be seated, with Jesus in the number one position and the most loyal members of his campaign staff on either side of him. Once this change has been accomplished then — finally, at last — the good people will commence to redeem the world from top to bottom, beginning from the top: The ultimate trickle-down effect.

“It doesn’t work that way,” Jesus tells them one more time. The new world is not remotely like the old one. It turns the old one upside down. The number ones are not the powerful ones having their pictures taken at the head of the table: they are the quiet ones slipping in and out among the guests, refilling wine glasses and laying down clean silverware for the next course. The great ones are not the dignitaries to the left and right of the ruler; they are the slaves who are stirring pots in the kitchen, testing the temperature of the soup for the honoured guests so that it is neither too hot nor too cold. James and John want Jesus to hurry up and be king of the world, but he has other things on his mind. Has everyone been served? Is all the food on the table? Does anyone need anything? *For the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

We have heard this teaching so many times that it is all but lost to us. The end of the line is the best place to be. The lowliest job is the one to covet. Those who serve are luckier than those in power and lovers of God get less status, not more. This is incomprehensible in terms of the world we live in. But Jesus tells them that he is not kidding.

He is not pretending to be a servant until the time comes for him to whip off his disguise and climb onto his throne: he is a servant through and through. The good seats are not his to give. He does not even have one himself. Someone else is in charge of all that, someone he is too shy to even name, whom it is his sole pleasure and purpose to serve.

If we don't understand it, we should not be too hard on ourselves. No one ever has, not really — not Peter, not James, not John, not any of the others who were nearest and dearest to him. If we understand any better than they did, it is only because Jesus is still serving us, still feeding us, still giving himself away for us. That is the only example of power he will give us, so maybe the best we can do is to grab hold of the mystery any way we can and hang on for dear life.

This much is for sure: whether we can make sense of it or not, serving is how we will transform the world, not from the top down but from the bottom up. The ultimate trickle-up effect. Our leaders can be servants, and the best ones will be, but we must never surrender our power to the powerful. The power God has given us is the strongest stuff in the world: the power to serve, which is the power to turn the Zebedee brothers' question upside down. "Teacher, we want to do for you whatever you ask of us."