

Scripture Reading for Sunday October 21st 2018

Mark 10:32-45 (NIV)

³² They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. ³³ “We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, ³⁴ who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.”

³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” ³⁶ “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked. ³⁷ They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.” ³⁸ “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” ³⁹ “We can,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”

⁴¹ When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. ⁴² Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Sermon: Power and the Kingdom: Glory or Service?

When something is said to have happened *three* times in the Bible it means it was significant; it’s important – so pay attention! In Mark’s Gospel there are three (so-called) passion “predictions” of Jesus and our reading this morning began with the third and final description of what was going to happen when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem.¹ In all three, Jesus refers to himself as the “Son of Man” and says that he will be killed, yet after three days he will rise again. The third description is the most detailed; it is as if Mark is not only building-up the literary tension but is also giving a summary of what will happen in chapters 14 and 15.² In two of these warnings, Jesus reveals that he will be delivered over the chief priests and teachers of the law; it is his *fellow* Jews who will reject both his ministry and his identity, and condemn him to death. And although crucifixion is never mentioned explicitly,³ Jesus says that he

¹ See Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34. This triple passion prediction structure is also in Mathew and Luke.

² See Mark 14:43-15:47.

³ Crucifixion is only mentioned explicitly in Matt 20:19.

will be humiliated, whipped, and killed. What is the *significance* of this triple emphasis? Some have focused on what appears to be Christ's foreknowledge and see this as evidence for his divinity. That, I think, is a mistake. Instead, I suggest that Mark is stressing that Jesus was acutely self-aware that he was a man on a divine mission. We get a further literary sense of that in a way that Mark describes Jesus as out front, leading the way, as he goes toward Jerusalem being followed by astonished and fearful disciples.⁴ As Mark tells it, Jesus knew who he was from the moment of his baptism when the Spirit of God came upon him, empowering him for ministry, and Jesus heard the words from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."⁵ Moreover, Jesus somehow knew that his ministry would also lead to suffering and death, and yet he continued faithfully in his mission confident of ultimate vindication by God the Father.⁶ Mark also points out that on all three occasions the disciples either misunderstand or reject Jesus' self-understanding,⁷ and three times Jesus immediately tries to correct their mistakes with teachings about the true meaning of discipleship.⁸

What happens after this third passion prediction? We read of a bizarre exchange between Jesus and James and John, two of his closest disciples. They begin, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask."⁹ Now that's a set-up a child might sheepishly pose to their parent - and the wise parent knows *never* to agree, but to hear them out! They then say, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."¹⁰ They selfishly seek the positions of highest honour - on the left and right of a Christ's kingly throne. Mark's readers, including you and me, instantly realize that this comical request is most appropriate. And this all follows the previous passion prediction, after which the disciples had argued as to who would be the *greatest* in the kingdom of God. Recall that Jesus responded, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."¹¹ Mark is evidently not shy in painting these key disciples in a poor light!¹² James and John were evidently ambitious and had clearly failed to understand Jesus, even though they had followed him for three years. If you think about this for a moment, it is amazing that they still connect kingly "glory" with this Galilean carpenter who has already incurred bitter opposition from the religious leaders of the day. There is an amazing confidence and loyalty on display here. However misguided James and John are, they never doubted Jesus would ultimately triumph; they still believed in him. Yet, they seem to have completely misunderstood the passion predictions and envisaged glory in Jerusalem. Of course, we know the full story, as will Mark's readers soon enough. Ironically, on Christ's right and left will be two criminals¹³ and surely that image is important in this context. It is as if Mark is joining the theological dots between Christ's "glory" and

⁴ Mark 10:32.

⁵ Mark 1:11; this was affirmed in the Transfiguration – see Mark 9:7.

⁶ I have also said that divine revelation isn't strictly necessary for that insight; all would-be messiahs ended up dead!

⁷ See Mark 8:32–33; 9:32; 10:35–41.

⁸ See Mark 8:34–9:1; 9:35–40; 10:42–45.

⁹ Mark 10:35. There is an odd echo here of Mark 6:23, in Herod's misguided comment to Herodias' daughter (Salome).

¹⁰ Mark 10:37.

¹¹ Mark 9:35; see also Mark 10:15, 31.

¹² Matt 20:20 attributes this ambitious request to their dotting mother, which presents James and John in a kinder light!

¹³ See Mark 15:27.

his crucifixion. In other words, Christ's true glory will be revealed when he is raised upon the cross, which is to be his throne. I'll come back to this aspect later.

Jesus does not rebuke James or John, but says, "You don't know what you are asking, only God can designate who will have such favoured positions."¹⁴ But then he asks them an odd question, "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"¹⁵ And James and John claim they can, which – at best - seems incredibly naïve to us, Mark's readers. Some Christians when they hear mention of the cup and of baptism think immediately of the sacraments.¹⁶ But, if you think about that for a moment, it does make much sense here. We need to appreciate what reference to "the cup" meant in *Jewish* thinking at the time, and it's mentioned many times in the Old Testament.¹⁷ In this context, the cup means "suffering" and baptism means, literally, being submerged or immersed in suffering.¹⁸ Jesus affirms that James and John will indeed experience the cup of suffering, and Mark's readers most likely knew that James was martyred in Jerusalem by Herod Agrippa in c. AD44.¹⁹

We are then told that when the other disciples heard about this conversation, they were angry with James and John.²⁰ Perhaps they were jealous! So Jesus calls them all over and tells them that although their [non-Jewish] civic leaders love to lord their sense of power over others, this is *not* to be your model for leadership. He then reminds them again, "whoever wants to become great among you must be your *servant*, and whoever wants to be first must be *slave* of all."²¹ Instead of *power* and *status*, think *servant* and *slave*. Then, Jesus adds: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to *serve*, and to give his life as a ransom for many."²²

That last statement is very profound, even if it is somewhat mysterious. It describes Jesus' whole way of life, and is not simply about his death. When we think of ransom, we see it in the context of a kidnapping; the prisoner is freed on the payment of money. Originally it meant the compensation required to a release or "redeem" property, like a slave, from another owner.²³ In the Old Testament, the word "ransom" was also a religious metaphor for God's reclamation of his people, for example in describing their liberation from slavery in Egypt.²⁴ It is a mistake to overanalyze this ransom image and

¹⁴ Mark 10:38a,40. See also Mark 13:32.

¹⁵ Mark 10:38b.

¹⁶ See also Mark 14:23-25,36.

¹⁷ There is a "cup of salvation" as well as that of suffering and of divine punishment on the disobedient; see Isa 51:17; Jer 25:15 – 16; Ezek 23:33; Pss 23:5; 116:13.

¹⁸ And this is consistent with Christ's prayer in Gethsemane: Mark 14:36.

¹⁹ See Acts 12:2.

²⁰ Mark 10:41.

²¹ Mark 10:43-44; see Mark 9:35; 10:15, 31. In 1 Kings 12:7 we read that an ideal king is to be a servant.

²² Mark 10:45.

²³ See Exod 21:8, 30; Lev 25:47– 2; Num 3:45–51.

²⁴ See Exod 6:6, 15:13; Isa 43:1–7; 44:21 – 23. And the image is further developed in the New Testament, see: Rom 3:23–25; 1 Tim 2:5–6; 1 Pet 1:18 – 19; Gal 2:20; 1 Cor 6:20; 7:23.

wonder who gets the payment.²⁵ Mark simply mentions this phrase in passing and doesn't develop this "ransom" idea into a formal theological framework²⁶ but pictures the death of Jesus as a necessary *means* of rescue without explaining precisely *how* it saves.²⁷ What *is* clear is that Mark does *not* believe Jesus' death was a meaningless tragedy, and this description of being "a ransom for *many*" distinguishes Christ's death from those of earlier Jewish martyrs in that *others* somehow benefit from his death.²⁸

If you zoom back for a moment to these three passion predictions and the resultant teaching that Jesus gives privately to his disciples, we see two broad themes. And I think we can take heart from them for today, as a well as a warning, and perhaps Mark had that in mind for *his* readers. The first is the *person* of Jesus and his self-awareness of his identity and mission. Jesus was obedient – or faithful - to his call, even though he sensed it would end in suffering and death. Even so, Jesus was confident that God would somehow vindicate him in *three days*, for Jesus repeats that claim three times. That would be shocking to Jews because they understood "resurrection" as occurring *only* at the "end of the age," or at the last judgement - if at all. If we believe this whole narrative to be true, as I do, then it is reassuring to see God at work in history in this way – and that gives us a confident hope for today. God *still* has a firm hand in history, even if we cannot precisely recognise his working as clearly as we would like,²⁹ and because God is faithful, he will in - his own good time - bring all of history to a fitting conclusion.

Second, if we look at the teaching Jesus gave to his disciples, we see that it was to encourage them and to warn them of the temptations that will impact upon their own sense call and future mission for the kingdom of God. And that includes us today. The temptations Jesus highlighted were money, sex, and power. We addressed money last week with Jesus' encounter with the rich man³⁰ where, much to the disciples surprise, Jesus said, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"³¹ Before that, Jesus warned of sexual temptations with his provocative language of cutting off body parts (!),³² followed up with his powerful call for faithfulness in marriage.³³ And today we get a repeat warning over the thirst for power and influence.³⁴ And we have to honestly recognize that this is quite natural, especially for an oppressed people. While we may not want to make outlandish, insensitive requests, like James and John, nevertheless, we still like to have the best seats in the house! We therefore have to face our own tendencies to be a son or daughter of Zebedee and acknowledge the seductive temptation for power and influence and the sense of security they can bring in an

²⁵ This was developed extensively by the Patristic Fathers who saw the devil as receiving the payment! There are other pertinent questions too, such as, if God wills to save, *why should* God have paid the ransom in order to do so?

²⁶ i.e., a doctrine of atonement.

²⁷ Whether Mark meant to or not, this Jesus who gives his life as "a ransom for *many*" echoes the servant in Isa 52:13–53:12.

²⁸ Mark also mentions "many" but doesn't address "how many"; it is neither "few" or "all." (See 1 Tim 2:6; Isa 53:11–12.)

²⁹ God does *not* micromanage history but partners with agents who have free-will; Christ's *obedience* to his sense of call is therefore exemplary and this provides an element of predictability (with hindsight) to the narrative.

³⁰ <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Wealth-and-the-Kingdom-of-God.pdf>

³¹ Mark 10:23.

³² <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/On-Causing-Little-Ones-to-Stumble.pdf>

³³ <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Divorce-Remarriage-and-the-Kingdom-of-God.pdf>

³⁴ See the first warning: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Who-Wants-To-Be-First.pdf>

uncertain world.³⁵ Three strong temptations, then and now: money, sex and power; some of you will remember I wrote about that triplet in one story about a young professor in *The Amish Farmer Who Hated L.A.*³⁶

As I conclude, there is a further important point I would like to mention. Many of us are more like James and John than we care to admit because we have been raised in churches that have promoted a “theology of glory.” The Christian life has been painted as one of victory, success, comfort, bliss; as a suffering-free abundant life – even prosperity and power.³⁷ And when our life doesn’t pan out that way, we wonder why not – isn’t that that is promised faithful Christians? Read the gospels again. Recall what Jesus said after his *first* passion prediction: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”³⁸ This resonates with the call to *service*, not power, in today’s reading. This call to genuine discipleship has been referred to as the “theology of the cross,”³⁹ and it involves trusting in God regardless of our life experiences and being willing to suffer *for the sake of the kingdom of God*. I am, here, *not* talking about the regular sufferings that happens in life, like: chronic pain, job loss, divorce, cancer, etc., but the suffering that naturally arises because we are committed to a *cause* – in this case, the gospel. People who are passionately committed to a cause, whatever it may be, anticipate resistance and a struggle, but continue anyway. In the same way, opposition to evil means drinking “the cup” of suffering associated with the cause of the kingdom of God. This is the antithesis to the “theology of glory” and it is always challenging. As a straightforward example, it might mean us speaking up for someone who is powerless in a given situation, and so risk personal humiliation. Understandably, many of us find such conflict stressful – even if it is the right thing to do. It also means combating bigger moral and ethical issues, like abuse, greed, hatred, and fear-mongering. There will inevitably be social and financial consequences to our discipleship simply because Christ’s upside-down priorities and values don’t correlate with those of our culture, and so in choosing *who* we will serve, there is a personal cost. Come follow me, says Jesus, and participate in what the world considers as weakness and failure and see it be transformed into true strength.

Now, unlike James and John, *we* know the end of the story – *Christ is risen!* - and, consequently, we do not need to live in fear or be unduly focused on security in an uncertain world. And we have the *same* Holy Spirit who empowered Jesus as *our* Strengthener, through the temptations and suffering we face on the way. Let us not forget that important fact, *ever*, as we endeavor to serve others in the name of Jesus. Let us pray.

³⁵ The disciples following Jesus were “astonished and afraid” (Mark 10:32). To experience fear in life is normal, but I believe Jesus does not want us to be paralyzed into inactivity by that fear or to risk the way of the cross.

³⁶ See Reddish, *The Amish Farmer Who Hated L.A. And 8 Other Modern-Day Allegories*, p51-61.

³⁷ That “theology of glory” also echoes the tune of our culture; health, wealth, and the pursuit of happiness.

³⁸ Mark 8:34. In the previous verse we hear Christ’s well-known rebuke of Peter: “Get behind me Satan.”

³⁹ Historically, this was a key element of Martin Luther’s theology and has been reawakened in recent decades.