

Proper 24B 2006

Isaiah 53:4-12

Heb 4:12-16

Mark 10:35-45

### **Are we able?**

James and John, two of the disciples want to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus when he comes into his glory. The other 10 disciples hear about the request and are indignant. In reply, Jesus is mild and in a teaching mode. The true nature of godly service is servant ministry. Asking James and John whether they are able to drink of the cup that Jesus will drink or be baptized with the baptism with which he is baptized, Jesus is referring to the cross and yet the unknowing and misunderstanding disciples quickly answer, we are able. James is the first of the disciples to be martyred for the faith, and John will be exiled to an island to suffer persecution and if this same John is also the author of the Gospel bearing his name, then the glory of Jesus is the cross. Now is the hour – now is the father glorified – is the way in which John's Gospel has Jesus describe the crucifixion. The redemption won by God's own self-gift will reconcile the world to God...and that is cause for glory. Thus the assurance that Jesus gave to James and John was perhaps not what they wanted to hear, but it was true.

I wonder if we can hear what Jesus continues to say to us in our own time. It is still the case that being a servant is more conventionally translated as someone who is down-trodden, heavy in burden, suffering some exclusion from the community or group, and oppressed. That means there is some force, power, or group in position to relieve the burden, the suffering or the oppression. The system is hierarchical and serving can have many negative connotations. Who wants to be a servant or a slave? Who would seek to be at the bottom of the social order? Who would be content to serve and receive no recognition or reward at all? Most of us are willing to serve but we want some empowerment in that service – some recognition of the work being productive, some proof that the effort is worth the pain and price we are paying.

Jesus suggests that in baptism we receive power – enough to lay down our lives, to die if necessary for the gospel, for our faith, for God. The cup we drink and the bread we eat gives us strength to be servant-leaders. In the Episcopal tradition, we have a group of people who are commissioned specifically for such work: the order of Deacons. Persons called to the Diaconate are to be servants, in a specific way, to call the church

as the household of God to service in the world. We are all called to go forth in the name of Christ into the world to work for the kingdom. We are all called to do ministry in the church and in the world. Sometimes we fail to recognize the nature of the church as the people of God. We talk about going to church by which we mean to a service in a building called our church. We forget the rest of the week is also church as the people of God leave the building and serve God in neighbors near and far.

We are able to recognize the scene of two up and coming members of a team wanting special privilege and recognition. It seems like a pretty human tendency and is played out in many ways in politics, academia, and in church related institutional issues of authority, and even within a parish, where one or more want to decide the direction of the community. We recognize the need to be affirmed in our ministry – who does not like to hear a complement about how some project turned out, or when they were effective witnesses of God's love – we all do. Each of us has a story to tell of when and where and how God met us in our journey of faith. That story is different and in some ways the same for all of us. God is known in delight, in joy, in sorrow, in hardship, in loss, and in gain. We know God in and through others.

Wanting to be favored, to be important, to be loved is intrinsic to the human condition. The problem is that everyone wants the same thing and we compete with others to get our share. Students want high grades often without the work needed to earn the grade. Students want to answer questions before they have thought about the question. Students seek to be recognized, honored, but fail to see that an education is only a preparation for something more. Every teacher knows that students come in every size and shape, in variety of abilities, with different motivation, and yet, the task of teaching is to enable all students to understand the information and find ways to apply their knowledge. Jesus is the prototype teacher – the rabbi of Nazareth. In every situation, Jesus taught the ones who would listen, who were willing to learn, who could clear the preconceptions off their minds and hear a new message. Can you open your minds and spirits today to hear a new word from God? Can you hear God say very clearly: you are precious; I love you; Come follow me. Are you able to hear? Are you able to respond? Are you able to take the risk of trusting God with your job, your family, your children and grandchildren, your parish, your life? Jesus does not ask for a partial

commitment or a part time ministry. Jesus calls us to follow in ways that will make us last, not first, in worldly terms.

In a world where parents ratchet up the pressure on the sidelines of the soccer field, pressing children to be the best athletes, the best students, to win the game, the scholarship, to enter the best college and the right career, we will find it hard to deal with being last or least, or servant of all. The call of Jesus is counter-cultural. In the rush to the top in our society creates huge imbalances. There are only so many top slots at premium preschools and colleges, only so many CEOs, only so many MVPs, only so many stars. Not everyone will be number one from a competitive perspective. But everyone can be number one with God.

Jesus is very clear about how to win with God. Jesus introduces a way of being that is focused on the word itself – the service of love – the healing that only compassion can bring to the experience of suffering. The creative Spirit that lives in all of us calls us out of ourselves to see the need of the other and to be responsive. Jesus teaches us that our relationship with God and our neighbor is worthy of time, commitment, and sacrifice. We might have to forego the extra time at the office that would gain a raise or promotion to attend the parents' conference at school for our children, but is it not worth the time to engage in the education of a child? We might have to take a few days off work to care for a sick friend, spouse, partner, or child – is that relationship not worth a few days of work? We might have to take leave from work in order to walk the last months with a friend or child or spouse who is entering the eternal realm of the kingdom. Being faithful to the relationships that form and shape our lives is a reflection of being faithful to God. God wants us to see Christ in the face of the other and to treat every human being a person with dignity. If we do this, we will be servants to each other, value each other, encourage each other, recognize the gifts in one another, and help each other live out our calling as disciples.

The answer Jesus gave to James and John is worthy of our reflection, prayer, and meditation. "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be a slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." The cup from which Jesus drank is self-emptying love, the giving of one's own life for others. The baptism with which he was baptized is a burial of the old world with its power games

and the rising of God's reign of justice, generosity, and joy – a downward mobility. The way of the world is upward mobility whereas the leadership of Christ is manifested in the suffering servant. Giving our lives means offering our total being, our hope and our despair, our doubts and our faith, our fear and our courage, our ambition and our humility to God. We are able if we are willing to be shaped by the spirit of God to do God's work in our time and place.