

The Church: A Society of Servants

Text:

Mark 10:32-45

“And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise.” And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” And they said to him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but 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.” And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Introduction:

The first line of the text sets the scene for what follows. “They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem”. When we read the text carefully we are struck by the different reactions that Jerusalem strikes in the hearts of the various members of the pilgrim band. Jesus, who alone truly knows what will transpire in Jerusalem, has taken the lead. He has set his face resolutely towards Jerusalem knowing that it is in Jerusalem that he will fulfill the will of the Father by offering himself as a “ransom for many”. It is perhaps the prophecy of Isaiah 50:4-7 that sustains him:

“The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I turned not backward. I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting. But the Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame.”

Those following Jesus, on the other hand, are described as being amazed and fearful. This seems to divide his followers into two groups, the twelve, whom he calls aside to instruct, and a larger group of followers who admired Jesus, but who, knowing the atmosphere of Jerusalem and the attitude of the Jewish leaders towards Jesus were fearful for him and probably fearful to be too closely identified with him.

To understand why Jesus takes the twelve aside and tells them in precise terms what is going to befall him in Jerusalem we must go back to chapter 8 beginning in verse 27. This is the great transition in Mark’s Gospel. Jesus had taken the twelve North, out of the territory of Galilee into the area of Caesarea Philippi. While there, he had asked them who others were saying that he was, and they had replied that the opinions were divided between John the Baptist, Elijah, or another prophet. He had then posed the question directly to them. “Who do you say that I am?” Peter had answered for the group: “You are the Messiah”. Immediately following this confession Jesus tells them for the first time: “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected of the elders and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (8:31). Upon hearing this declaration Peter had rebuked Jesus. The reason for his rebuke was that the scenario of events that Jesus had just predicted would transpire in Jerusalem did not correspond at all to the vision that Peter had had in mind when he had confessed that Jesus was the Messiah.

Peter and the other disciples attached to the term visions of glory. This is the reason why in today’s text James and John’s question is qualified by “in your glory” (verse 37). Their vision of the Messiah, like that of Israel, was that he would defeat Israel’s enemies, reestablish the throne of David, and rule righteously from Jerusalem. At this point in time only Jesus grasps that before the Messiah can reign he must first suffer for the sins of the people as prophesied in the Old Testament.

So as Jesus and the twelve make their way towards Jerusalem, they do so with totally different expectations, and Jesus is trying to make the disciples understand the true meaning of his being the Messiah, and how they should relate to it. Again, a second time, in Chapter 8 verse 31 he predicts: “The Son of Man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill him; and after that he is killed, he shall rise the third day.” The ongoing incomprehension of the twelve is

evidenced by their reaction in verse 32 – “but they understood not that saying, and were afraid to ask him.” That they are persisting in maintaining their own messianic vision is evident from the passage that immediately follows in which they are disputing among themselves “who should be the greatest”.

So now, in the text under consideration, for a third time Jesus has taken them aside and explained the reason why he is going to Jerusalem. He has given far more details than in the two previous instances, but the purpose has not changed. He must die and after three days he will rise again. That the disciples remain as dense as before is demonstrated again by the incident that immediately follows. This time it is James and John who come with a request. They want to know if they may have the most privileged places, one at his right and the other at his left, when he receives his glory. Jesus does not deny his future glory, but he reminds them with a question that his glory will be preceded by a horrible ordeal. The question is: “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” Both of these are Old Testament metaphors for great suffering. They are references to the sufferings that Jesus is to endure in Jerusalem for the sins of the world. They are unique. He alone must suffer them. James and John, however, still ignorant of the true meaning of what Jesus is saying, and anxious to secure their position in his glorious kingdom, assure him that they are able.

Jesus then acknowledges that they will indeed participate in his cup and in his baptism. It is, perhaps, worthwhile to explain what Jesus meant by that, since we have just stated that his suffering were unique. Some have taken it as a reference to their martyrdom. James was, in fact, the first of the twelve to suffer a martyr’s death in Acts 12, but John is reported to have been the only one of the twelve to have not died a martyr’s death. What it refers to is the same thing Jesus meant in chapter 8 when, after rebuking Peter, in verse 33, he says to all of his followers in verse 34: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” It is what he meant when he said in John 15:18-20: “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.” That Peter finally came to understand is evidenced by what he wrote much later in I Peter 4:12-16: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify

God in that name.” Christ suffered uniquely for the sins of the world. This was his cup and his baptism. Those who believe in him, identify with him, and follow him sometimes suffer “as a Christian” simply because of their identification with their master. When they do they are bearing their cross and sharing his sufferings. The difference is he suffered for our sins; we suffer because of our identification with him.

Having said this, Jesus then reminds them that it is not up to him who sits on his left, and on his right. He then proceeds to impress upon them the lesson that is the main point that I want us to see from this text, namely, that his church is to be a society of servants. He does this by making a contrast between the normal method of human leadership, and his method.

I. Normal Human Leadership

He begins by reminding them that “those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.” In our culture that has been tempered by Christian values, where we expect even public officials to be public servants, we might have a slight difficulty grasping the image that Jesus is referring to. The twelve would not have. Even though they detested this way of exercising power in their Gentile overlords and petty officials, they could not wait to be in power themselves so they could exercise it over others. This is one of the sad lessons of history. Those who have been unjustly treated by others often follow the same harsh patterns of behavior when they find themselves in a position of authority.

A passage in Luke, where Jesus is trying to make the same point as he is here, demonstrates just how engrained such behavior is in human nature. In Luke 22, after saying essentially the same thing that he has said in the present passage about the Gentile rulers, he asks the disciples a question in verse 27. Here is the question: “For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table?” Now most of Jesus’ parables, illustrations, and questions are based on the obvious, the things that everyone would agree on. In this case had he given the disciples opportunity to respond they would have neither reflected nor hesitated before answering: “He who reclines at table”. “Everyone knows that.” But Jesus surprises them by saying “but I am among you as the one who serves”. There, as here, he is saying: “This is not my way and if you are going to follow me, you must become servants.”

II. But it shall not be so among you

Jesus, then, contrasts normal human imposition of authority with an emphatic “but it shall not be so among you.” In his church authority is to be exercised in another way. “Whoever”, he says, “whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.” His church is to be a society of servants, and he is, himself, the chief servant, the ultimate servant of God-- “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Now we must add one thing about this service that we offer to God and to one another. It is a willing service. The Son of Man, as God’s servant, *gave* his live as a ransom for many, and he gave it willingly. As he says in John’s Gospel: “No man takea it (my life) from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (John 10:18). This is where today’s topic and last week’s topic come together. Our service is freely given. We have received freely of God’s grace and we now offer our service freely to God and to one another, and the only constraint of this service is the love of Christ.