

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, OCTOBER 21, 2018

22nd after Pentecost

TEXTS: Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

“Glory”

For sake brevity, I assume, the Lectionary committee left out verses that immediately precede today’s gospel lesson. In those verses Jesus proclaims to his disciples, for the third time and in greater detail than ever before the fate that awaits him in Jerusalem. He states quite clearly not only that he will be rejected by the religious authorities of the city, but that he will be handed over to the Gentiles, that he will be mocked, spit upon, whipped and killed - and - that after three days he will rise again.

Now one might think that this dire prediction would be enough to deter just about anyone. Yet at this point the disciples seem relatively unfazed by the whole business. One of the things that we may be missing about disciples here is that many of them were probably Zealots, guerilla warriors. These were men who were, from the standpoint of the Jews, freedom fighters and, from the standpoint of the Romans, terrorists. You see, the Jews knew that they could not defeat the Romans in a face to face battle. After all, they had no standing army and the armies of Rome were well trained and plentiful. Therefore those radicals among the Jews, those for whom the Roman occupation was particularly odious, often resorted to tactics that we now see as terroristic; sabotage, inciting unrest, fear mongering, yes and even murder. We are told in the Gospels that James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were simple fishermen; but in the third chapter of the Gospel of Mark, as Jesus called the twelve to him, he proclaimed James and John “Boanerges” or “Sons of Thunder”; quite possibly a reference to the fact that, like the second Simon (not Peter) was named outright, they were Zealots.

If this were the case it may well be that James and John knew exactly what they were getting themselves into when they asked Jesus to place them at his right and left hands. Remember that in all his predictions of the fate awaiting him in Jerusalem Jesus ended each prediction with the words “rise again”. To a Zealot, to a person who thinks militarily, rise again might just mean “Come back to beat the snot out of those bad old Romans.” And the “Sons of Thunder” wanted to be there when all that whoopin’ went down! They wanted a piece of the glory!

When I was discussing passage with my colleagues this past Monday morning, a bit of music popped into my head and I couldn’t get it to go away. The lines come from the musical

“Pippin”, a fictionalized biography of one of the sons of Charlemagne and his search for meaning and purpose in life. At one point Pippin decides to join his father and his half-brother Lewis in battle against the Visigoths. Young Pippin of course has a glorified fantasy of what war is all about and as his Father is trying to lay out his plans for the coming battle Pippin keeps interrupting with, (sung) “And then the men go marching out into the fray; conquering the enemy and carrying the day. Hark the blood is pounding in our ears. Jubilation, we can hear a grateful nation cheer.”

I would propose you this morning that it is highly possible that James and John were fantasizing about the glory of victory; marching on the left and right of their conquering hero, the one who died and rose again to lead the people against the brutal oppression of Rome. Yes, their leader might be rejected by the chief priests and the scribes (who were lily-livered cowards anyway, afraid of their own shadows and terrified of anything that might rile up the Roman army). Yes, their leader might be handed over to Rome (whose minions would, quite naturally, scorn and ridicule him and possibly even torture him; maybe even kill him). But this is the Messiah here, the son of the living God, greater than the prophets of old, greater even than Moses, a son of the royal line of King David. Our leader, our man will rise again, even from death itself, and will lead his people against their oppressors and in great glory will reign over the whole world! And we will be his captains! We, his closest friends and allies; we will lead his armies, maybe even the armies of the angels of God! Glory!

And you and I look upon James and John and say to ourselves, “those dodos”! We say that, of course, because we know the rest of the story. We know that Jesus called the brothers down. We know that Jesus said to the brothers and to all the disciples, “It is not so among you.” “It not so among you because it not so for me.” I did not come to be served. I did not come to conquer, to rule, to Lord if over anyone, but rather to serve.

Now lest we get too critical of James and John, let us look at ourselves in this day and in this age. Do we celebrate the servant or do we celebrate the conqueror? Do we celebrate the one who humbles her/himself before others or do we celebrate the boastful, the one who proclaims loudly “I am the greatest!” Even when we gather to worship Christ our Savior, do we talk more about Christ the humble servant or Christ the King of heaven? Do we speak more about the humility of Christ or the glory of Christ?

We are a competitive people and we live in a competitive society. We are trained from

birth not to simply do our best in life but rather to beat the opposition; to be better than everyone else. We entertain ourselves with this thing we call “sports” in which the entire point of the spectacle has little to do with how well a person performs, but rather with whether or not that person can out-perform or perform better than someone else. And for some of us, the more violent and barbaric the sport can be, the more entertaining it is for us. Forget American football, a sport that leaves participants maimed and disabled year after year. Let’s put two people in a cage and just let them hammer away at each other until one of them can’t stand up any more.

Our television ads are full of quiet violence, often speaking about how this or that product crushes the competition. Our politicians sometimes speak about working in a bipartisan manner, but when the time comes for an election, the mud slinging and abasement of the opponent rule the day. The fastest way up the corporate ladder has little to do with working collaboratively for the sake of the company and much more to do with outperforming those around you so that you stand out and are noticed, often while actually ignoring the greater ideals and needs of the company. We have no idea what kinds of advances could be made in medicine or science or technology if researchers would work with each other instead of hoarding their individual discoveries to themselves. How far do you think you would get in a job interview for a position in a major corporation if you spoke constantly about wanting to be the humble servant of others?

Let’s face it folks, the world is geared toward glory and the rewarding of glory seekers. It raises up conquerors and at best ignores the humble. Yet our Savior said to his disciples and continues to say us, “It is not so among you. Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant. Whoever wishes to be first among you must be (and I believe that Mark’s choice of words here was very purposeful) slave of all.” It goes against the grain of our society, of our government, of our economic system; and it certainly goes against the World Series or any of today’s pro football games.

The path of Christ is not an easy path, it never was and it never will be, for it is a path to a cross. Yet it is path that we are called to travel if we are to be Christ’s true disciples. May God grant us strength for the journey and a clear vision of eternal life not of glory, but of peace.

Amen.