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Mark 10:35-45
Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 21, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text is the gospel reading, which concludes: “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The Sundays in Lent are supposed to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Last week’s Gospel reading of John 3:16 pointing to the only Son upon the cross and teaching us that “in this way God loved the world” certainly achieved that. But today’s text sure seems to include a lot that focuses on the Christian and not on the Christ.

Nevertheless, this is a wonderful text to hear as we move closer to Holy Week, and as we unpack these words, you will learn how truly the text keeps our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

The reading begins with the request of James and John to be seated in eternity, flanking Jesus, that they might share in his glory. They come to Jesus and say, “Teacher, whatever we ask of you, we want you to do for us.... Grant us to sit one at your right hand and one at your left in your glory.”

Now, that might seem like a rather forward, almost demanding and assertive, expectation...almost in keeping with what

else we know about these sons of Zebedee: aren't these the two Jesus himself dubbed "the Sons of Thunder" because they wanted to call down heaven upon those who weren't part of their group?!

But, before dismissing them in a contemptible light, consider that *Matthew's* account of this occasion includes a detail Mark's doesn't, which – in keeping with the 8th commandment – paints John and James in a more generous light. Matthew's gospel begins this account with *these* words:

Then the **mother** of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and **kneeling before him** she asked him for something. And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom."

That gives us a much clearer understanding, doesn't it? John and James weren't forcing themselves to Christ's side; rather, a concerned mother humbly made an appeal on behalf of her sons. Certainly, Mark is not wrong in saying that the sons desired the benefit (perhaps even zealously so!), but how helpful to know the request was one with which we can sympathize – what godly mother doesn't want God's best for her sons? And what faithful Christian doesn't want to be at Jesus' side in glory? Are you to be blamed and shamed for seeing yourself as that dear little sheep of Christ whom he defends, safeguards, even holds in his hands? Of course not!

Nevertheless, there still seems to be something "off" about the question. Jesus himself responds, "You do not know what you

are asking.” Then he explains that to sit on his right hand and left is not at all what they think it is... that, to share in his seat is to share in his suffering.

Though not the main point, it may help us to understand there’s a notable difference between the disciples’ use of the word “left” and Jesus’ use of the word “left.” In the English it all sounds the same, but in the Greek, there were actually two words that could be used: the disciples use the word *αριστερος* (“in relation to the right, second-best”). But, Jesus’ uses the word *ευωνυμων*, (“of good name”) – it was a euphemism for what was widely regarded as “bad fortune to be on the left.” In fact, it’s the description of the thief on the cross *left* of Jesus (the thief who mocked Jesus and implicitly was *not* remembered by Him when He came into his kingdom), *and* it’s used of the goats on the left separated from the sheep on the right... Those goats may have *thought* they had a good name before God – after all, they too rise up from the dead in the resurrection of *all* flesh – but they rise up to find out their name is not considered good at all (their works, merits, earthly riches and status amount to nothing), and being on Christ’s left means eternal damnation for them.

So, Jesus says to John and James, “You don’t know what you’re asking. You *may* with great zeal share in the baptism I will undergo and the cup of suffering I will drink” (recall, they had emphatically guaranteed – “Oh yes, we are able!”... just like Peter

would say, “Even if all fall away, I will never fall away!”... “Yes,” they say, “we are able to take on this baptism and this cup.” [Take care not to instinctively misinterpret that as the Sacraments. Jesus elsewhere speaks of his death as a baptism of sorts... and of the cup of which he will drink, does he not pray in Gethsemane regarding his impending death: “Father, if possible, let this cup pass from me”?]). So, Jesus effectively says, “Yes, you (my apostles) may join in my suffering, but your share in my glory is *prepared* (and Matthew includes the words) “*prepared by my Father.*” Now, that – like the use of the word “left” – should *also* remind us of the goats and the sheep, for it is not to the goats on the left, but to the sheep that Jesus says, “Come you who are blessed *by my Father*; inherit the kingdom *prepared for you*”... salvation by grace, not by status.

Where does this leave us? Perhaps you say, “See, I knew they were asking incorrectly. To sit immediately on his right and left? That’s asking a bit much. It will be sufficient just to be in heaven; I don’t need to so immediately request a share in his glory.”

So then why in daily life does your heart so eagerly request it already now?: What we don’t request in the *eternal* dwellings – to be right at Christ’s side and (if you will) to share with ‘being in charge’ – *that* we often are already seeking in our earthly dwellings: glory, riches, a share of all treasure and power deemed good and godly over (and even with the approval of) the world. Even though Christ is king over all, when we seem to lose control of the earthly kingdom in

which we dwell, we grow fainthearted and despondent. Even though God is Creator, Provider, and Lord over all earthly wealth and every good thing comes from his Fatherly hand... when the riches of our earthly kingdom are taken from us by increasing taxation and handouts for those we don't believe need/deserve it, when healthcare is mismanaged and it seems bad laws remove rights, our *proper* desire for wise and fair policy becomes a *bitterness* toward our neighbor or a hoarding greed to hold on to the wealth and health I once had. Yes, we – like the ten – might be indignant at James and John for wanting control over their *eternal* well-being, but Jesus points out that desire for control over our lives is already a root problem in matters of our *temporal* well-being.

He says, “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.”

A lot of recognizable themes should reach your ears with this response. First, that Jesus says: “those who are *considered (who seem to be, by opinion of the people)* rulers of the Gentiles.” What does that say about your view of earthly rule? They are to be *considered* rulers according to their office and vocation; but vocation is carried out before God, not just before the populace. “Lording authority” over those subject to you may be the common theme in

the United States (after all, it's just another Gentile country),... yes, those rulers may be *considered* rulers and – because they've forgotten they are merely officeholders of a civil law always and forever under the Divine Law... having forgotten that, they lord their authority and power over the people and leave the people destitute and despondent while they fight for power.

“But not so among you,” Jesus says.

Why not? Why does Jesus prevent us from lording authority over others and striving for the best seat of power? Have you ever stopped to ask this question? Is it just a matter of random moral Christian behavior. No! It's *more* than that. It's vocation. You have not been made rulers to lord over others. But, you have been made priests. Peter's epistle calls you “a royal priesthood.” And priests *serve* one another, sacrifice for one another, and intercede for one another. Indeed, ours is not “as kings, to hold fast to an earthly kingdom and rule,” but as priests, “to hold fast to the heavenly covenant.”

Isn't that exactly how our Old Testament reading teaches us? In Jeremiah, the Lord says His new covenant (his divine and holy will in Christ Jesus) has been written on our heart. Thus, as priests of God, our 'heavenly Temple, our heavenly homeland, our heavenly kingdom' is not just governed by a bunch of “lording laws.” Rather, impressed upon us is the divine and holy Ten *and* – even more! – the Gospel and good news of the loving God who gave the Ten. All of

that is lavished upon us in our baptism, which defines how we live our daily lives with one another *and* safeguards us from becoming unduly enamored with, trusting in, dependent upon, or even fearful of those who lord earthly authority over us.

Why fear earthly power or crave earthly power? Our title of priest in the kingdom of God is incompatible with the concept of using authority for our own gain/advantage. Rather, we serve, we love, because of Him who first loved us. Isn't that how Jesus concludes his teaching? With Gospel: "Even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve" – isn't that the very vocation of priest? – indeed, our status as priests is truly merely a *share* in that of our great High Priest, who is able and authorized to do what we daily priests couldn't do, to provide the *atoning* sacrifice we priests can't provide. (Recall, once a year it was *only* the high priest that could enter into the Holy of Holies and on the Day of *Atonement*.) Thus, Jesus says, "Even the Son of Man came to serve... and to give his life as a ransom for many."

There's the work of the High Priest – to give his life as a ransom – an atoning sacrifice for our sins. What a glorious High Priest we have, a unique High Priest we have ... notice!, a *kingly* High Priest (indeed, as the epistle reading says, "designated by God a high priest after Melchizedek," Melchizedek who – Scripture records - was both priest and king of Salem, making him "priest of Peace; king of Peace" ... In great fulfillment, the Epistle Reading says, "Jesus

became the source of eternal salvation (priestly work) to all who obey him (his kingly work)"... and all of that, He freely shared with us, making us (as Peter had said) a royal priesthood (kings are royal! – we share in Christ’s kingdom! But “royal *priesthood*.’... any “kingly” notions you have must be defined by your serving vocation as priest.) What a share is yours -as the royal priesthood – with Him who as our Priest and King ruled by serving us... beat back the enemy by sacrificing his own life for us because we could not provide our own share of salvation.

But that, in turn, means we do have reason to instinctively think of *sharing* Baptism and the Cup with him! Doesn’t St Paul say that all who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?, that – sharing in the benefits of his death – we will thereby share in his resurrection! And, yes, we share the cup of bitterness... but His bitterness for our joy; His blood poured out for our life... for even the Old Testament priesthood knew that the life of the sacrificial animal was in its blood.

Is there any remaining concern this Lenten text doesn’t keep our eyes fixed on Christ Jesus? No, it even ends right where our focus should remain: “The Son of Man came to lay down his life as a *ransom*.”

A ransom is the purchase price paid by a King to free those in bondage. It is also the great sacrifice of the altar served by the High Priest doing his priestly service. That *ransom* is the fruit of the cross

by which Baptism pulls you from the grave and forgiveness of sins is applied in your daily life, and the Cup of his suffering overflows from the chalice of the new covenant right into your mouth... all for the sake of his royal priesthood who live in and share in the heavenly utopia no lording earthly authority can ever establish, but the divine covenant guarantees in the heavenly places. How does Jeremiah's prophecy say it of our priestly life in this covenant of Christ Jesus? "I will put my law with them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And... they shall *all* know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord."

That is true freedom – to be ransomed out of darkness and into his marvelous light... not scramble for the supposedly great two places of being seated at the right and left of the Christ. Rather, we can (all our days) look upon His mercy seat, keep our eyes fixed on Him and His High Priestly work, and live our daily lives confidently, calmly, "congregationally" at the foot of the cross... to be governed by one divine and merciful truth of the covenant: "I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more." That merciful truth of 'sins forgiven' governs us forever because our High Priest is King and our King is High Priest; just as our Melchizedek is *Lord*, He is also *Savior*: "the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to lay down his life as a ransom for many."

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son

And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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