

BIBLE READING: Mark 10:35-45

SERMON

As I began to prepare for this Sunday I read a reflection on the Gospel passage that challenged me. Rev Dr. Kathryn Matthews Huey has helped me engage with this story in a fresh way. I hope these insights may help you see this story in a new way, and that it helps you to come closer to Jesus.

The disciples certainly wanted to be close to Jesus – although it is hard to figure out just what was going through their minds as they walked closer to Jesus. We can only guess what's going on in the minds of the disciples as they walk the dusty roads with Jesus. For a while now, they knew that Jerusalem is their destination, and over the past three chapters in Mark's gospel, it seems that they haven't wanted to know why they're on this journey in the first place. Three times Jesus has told them, directly, what's going to happen, that he is going to die, and each time they react badly, seeming to miss his point entirely. Back in chapter eight, Peter actually rebuked Jesus for talking about his rejection and suffering, and Jesus responded by calling him "Satan."

As they continued on their way, Jesus used the time for some in-depth, private lessons for his disciples, and he once again spoke of his coming betrayal and death, and his rising again.

The disciples' response was a lively argument (which didn't escape Jesus' notice) over who among them was the greatest. And now, in this tenth chapter, as Mark's long introduction to the passion narrative (the story about Jesus' death and resurrection) comes to an end, Jesus tells them one more time that he is going to Jerusalem to face his death.

What happens next beggars the imagination. Could Jesus have been any clearer about what was about to happen? We imagine the early Christian audience listening to the entire Gospel, and we assume that they must have heard the repetition three times of this terrible prediction. Where have the disciples been? How insensitive could they be? The disciples are left scratching their heads. Scholars suggest several possibilities: maybe James and John are soldiers who haven't been tested in battle – full of visions of glory and victory. If this is true – then we might criticise them not for paying attention to Jesus' words about the coming disaster, and for responding too eagerly and ignorantly.

But on the other hand, the disciples may totally get what Jesus is saying. In that case, they are understandably afraid, and, rather than being power hungry, they react as human beings naturally do: they seek security. As human beings we crave to be secure, even if that security might violate many of our most important values and beliefs. We want to make sure that, no matter what happens, our place and our safety are secured; if we know that, we think we can handle whatever comes. Jesus reassures James and John that, in spite of their fear, they will measure up in the end.

But are they speaking from anxiety? Or could it be that they are speaking out of deep faith? Could it be that James and John have a profound confidence in Jesus and his final triumph. No matter how bad things may look or sound, they are confident in Jesus' final victory. After all, these disciples have been following Jesus for some time now, and have given up everything in order to be with him. But whatever the reason, Jesus responds by telling them that they have no idea what they are asking.

As long as we recognise that in many ways we are just like James and John, it seems reasonable to be disappointed in their strategic plan for Jesus, their big picture for his ministry. Their religious imagination, it seems, has failed them. They're going with the same

old categories and assumptions that they've always had, and just inserting themselves into the places of prestige and power. Instead of growing closer to Jesus' radical vision of the reign of God, they struggle with walking away from their old and long-cherished expectations, those hard to erase desires for personal power and glory, that entangle and trap us all. Is it any wonder that this section of Mark's Gospel begins and ends with stories about blind men being restored to sight?

This time Jesus responds to the disciples' cluelessness with a very difficult question: Are they able to drink the same cup and be baptised with the same baptism that he has received? Their response is embarrassingly swift: Yes, of course we can! They have no real idea what Jesus is talking about. In the early church the phrases, "drinking the cup" and "baptism," were "images for death". And we of course know that Jesus is speaking of his own death, and that most of his earliest disciples are said to have been martyred (along with many other early Christians).

Many Christians today still suffer and die for their faith in Jesus. But what about the vast majority of Christians today who long to follow Jesus faithfully, but will most probably not (literally) lose their lives for doing so? We can begin to understand Jesus' words about this cup and baptism as a dying of the self as the centre of its own concern and a dying to the world as the centre of security and identity" That kind of dying leads to transformation, when we lose our self-absorbed insecurities and are reborn: dying to an old life and being born into new life.

It happens to different people in different ways (and it happens to us), whether sudden or by a long journey, but it surely involves a letting go.

So James and John – and these two were the ones closest to Jesus, among the first called, the ones he took up on the mountaintop – have got their minds on power, not on serving and certainly not on dying an inglorious death. There are only so many head tables in the world, and the game of musical chairs never stops. James and John think the systems are good, but the wrong people are in the places of power; once they come into their own, alongside Jesus, everything will be fixed from the top down in the ultimate trickle-down effect.

How seductive is that dream! Meanwhile, Jesus is up-ending the head tables and paying far more attention to serving than being served. And that's how Jesus takes the disciples' focus away from their own ambitions: he tells them not to be like the Gentiles with all their lording over others, their prestige and position and the bullying that comes with them. Don't be like that, he says. In fact, it is like that among you.

The reign of God is so very different from our conventional way of doing things, and our conventional beliefs about what is best. Jesus calls us (and teaches us by example) to transform the world, not from the top down but from the bottom up. The ultimate trickle-up effect. That's the power that God gives us in abundance, the greatest life-changing power in the world: the power to serve.

Who is Jesus addressing here? Are instructions for those in positions of leadership and power or those who long to be in power? This passage reminds us that Jesus himself modelled Servant leadership and a willingness to lay down one's life in the process. In doing so, Jesus ransomed us, the many, setting us free just as a slave or a hostage could be ransomed and set free. We speak a lot today about Jesus dying for our sins, or because of our sins, or both. We find (or take) great comfort in that belief. But comfort isn't the whole message of the gospel, in fact, sometimes the gospel is quite dis-comforting.

There's more to it than that - more than just getting our lives together, and it may even be disruptive at times, requiring a costly pouring out of one's life for another, maybe for a frail

parent, a difficult spouse, a special child, another member of the Christian fellowship who has unusual needs, or any person whose situation calls on us to respond in neighbourly service at personal cost. This understanding of serving is something we can grasp and live out, no matter the cost. It does mean a change in our worldview and the values ingrained in us, but we contemporary followers of Jesus, the James and Johns in our own place and time, hear the same call, and the same offer, that our ancestors did long ago.

Will we follow all the way to Jerusalem, and the cross, and the rising again?