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“Just who the #*!! do they think they are?!” That is how I imagine Mark would have quoted the 10 angry disciples in today’s Gospel if he had been able to do it in the style of Sarge, a character from the “Beetle Bailey” comic strip.

Mark says that the 10 disciples were “indignant” when they heard James and John request the most honorable places in Jesus’ glory. By asking who the “#*!!” the brothers thought they were, the incensed majority was unpredictably close to what Jesus wanted to teach them. More precisely, the question of the moment was, “Just who did they think Jesus was?” That would then explain who they thought they were as disciples.

Even though they sought a singular distinction, James and John were no further off the mark than the rest of the gang. They had all carefully cultivated a chronic hearing impediment when it came to listening to Jesus explain his mission, and they were blissfully blind to what it entailed for them. When the two of them asked for first places, the rest were probably fuming because they had not thought of it first.

Mark makes it easy to critique their ambition and attention deficit when it came to Jesus’ explanation of his mission. But we should not be too quick to judge. Mark wrote his Gospel with the intention of holding a giant mirror before his readers. He is also pointing at all of us who think of ourselves as disciples today.

Today’s readings focus on our image of God and discipleship. Isaiah’s oracles or songs of the “Servant of the Lord” make Job’s life look like a rose garden as they explain that God’s servant will be crushed in infirmity as God’s will is accomplished through him. This is no call to self-inflicted pain or an invitation to offer oneself for martyrdom. Isaiah’s servant suffers precisely because, like so many punished prophets, he faithfully represents the God rejected by people in power. His offering for sin consists in accepting solidarity with the rejected God rather than yielding to violent attempts to obliterate his witness.

The selection from the Letter to the Hebrews focuses on Jesus as the Son of God who knows exactly what it feels like to be human, to be tempted, to be afraid. The author of Hebrews wants us to know that as the human face of God, there is nothing in our experience that Jesus does not comprehend from the inside out. In fact, says the author, Jesus feels with us so profoundly that his response is a continual offer of the graces of solidarity and the strength to share in his victory over the powers of death.

If all of that sounds like too much for us, we are in fine company. Today’s Gospel paints a picture of Jesus’ closest disciples as Olympic champions of denial and self-serving misinterpretation. No matter how much Jesus talked about the first being last and his upcoming suffering, the disciples could not or would not move beyond their own glorious expectations for a messiah and his victory.

Last week we celebrated the canonization of St. Oscar Romero, the archbishop of San Salvador who was martyred in 1980 while he was celebrating the Eucharist in the chapel of a sisters' hospital for terminal cancer patients. Early in his time as archbishop, Romero went to the town of Aguilares where Jesuit Fr. Rutilio Grande had been martyred. There he preached a sermon in which he told the people whose church had been desecrated: "You are an image of the wronged Divinity ... but if you suffer this pain with faith, then you will give your suffering a redemptive meaning and the people of Aguilares will sing a joyful hymn of liberation."

Romero was calling his people to assume the cost of discipleship that sacrilegious circumstances were holding out before them. He was telling the people of Aguilares that they had the grace and thus the ability to be Isaiah's contemporary servants of the Lord. In recent months, Pope Francis has given a renewed focus to what St. Oscar Romero told his people in the 1980s. In the apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (#20, 101), Francis calls us to unite ourselves to the Lord's death and resurrection in a unique and personal way. For some like Romero that may entail death. For others it calls forth the holiness of solidarity with people who are outcast: the innocent unborn, the poor and abandoned, the vulnerable elderly and the victims of human trafficking. It takes very little time for solidarity with such as these to engender the ire that led Isaiah's servant to suffer and Jesus to be put to death.

Today's readings beg the question: "Disciple, just who do you think you are?" The true answer comes from knowing what we seek and the company we keep.

ISAIAH 53:10-11

The first reading comes from the end of the fourth of Isaiah's songs of the Servant of the Lord (Isaiah 52:13—53:12). Isaiah's imagery is intentionally shocking, reminding his readers that God's ways are not what human beings generally seek or even understand. Isaiah makes that clear from the opening line of this song: "Who would believe what we have heard? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" (53:1). These lines challenge the reader to recognize God in the life of the most wretched creature they have known.

Isaiah's servant of the Lord, who gives his life as an offering for sin, anticipates Jesus' own message about the meaning of life and God's power to save. As the people of God tried to understand the divine plan and will for humanity, they remembered that Moses had promised that if they chose the life plan offered by God's commands they would "live and grow numerous" (Deuteronomy 30:16). Moses promised that "the Lord, your God, will bless you in the land you are entering to possess" (ibid). But too often they saw Moses' promise contradicted by the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the just. As a result, some chose to adhere to the ambivalent message of Ecclesiastes 3 which ends by saying: "I saw that there is nothing better for mortals than to rejoice in their work; for this is their lot. Who will let them see what is to come after them?" That declaration stops just a half-step short of saying, "Eat, drink and be merry, for we can never know what God is up to."

The servant of God stands as a stark alternative to both of those approaches. Because the suffering servant is an innocent victim, his example undercuts any self-centered motives for living a just life. Goodness is no guarantee of prosperity; in fact, the way of the world most often seems to prove the opposite. The way to understand the servant cannot be found by starting from human wisdom or ambition or even human hope. The only way to understand the revelation of the servant is by remembering that before anything else, the servant is the servant of God. The servant of whom Isaiah speaks, the servant through whom the early Christians came to understand Christ's mission, is a human being whose entire identity comes from the love of God and the willingness to make that love palpable in the world.

The servant represents God rather than sinful, selfish humanity. What the servant reveals in innocent suffering is God's forbearance in the face of sinfulness and the human rejection of divine love. Just as marriage is to be a sign of God's faithfulness, the servant's innocent suffering is a sign of God's unlimited willingness to put up with humanity and to forgive without retribution. In this vein, Paul D. Hanson, author of Isaiah 40-66, explains that the servant embodied God's saving initiative and appealed to the hearts of humanity "neither through irresistible attractiveness nor overwhelming power but through a devotion to God that was so complete that concern for personal comfort and gain was eclipsed by the desire to serve."

The servant whom Isaiah proclaimed was never named and was probably only an ideal in Isaiah's time. Christians saw that ideal fulfilled in Jesus, the one sent by the strange God of Israel whose role was not to be served but to love and therefore to serve.

PSALMS 33:4-5, 18-19, 20, 22

“Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you.” This refrain for today’s psalm, a variation on the last line we pray today, could well be the theme song for Isaiah’s Servant of the Lord. It can be like a tune that gets stuck in your head. It is a continual plea and at the same time, a proclamation of faith.

Our first verse elaborates on the reasons for steadfast trust in God. First, it proclaims that God’s word is as solid as the works of God’s creation, a subtle reminder of Genesis’ depiction of how God created with only a word. The psalmist’s declaration that God loves justice and right is reassurance to anyone who strives to live justly.

The second verse tells us that God does not simply love virtue, but gazes lovingly upon those who hope for divine mercy. Because the psalmist knows that everyone must die, the claim that God preserves the faithful from death reiterates the promise Isaiah quoted, “Because of his affliction he shall see the light in fullness of days” (53:11).

We should pay careful attention to the fact that our third verse moves from the objective third person to the first-person plural. Now, echoing the “we” of the refrain, we proclaim our shared hope and pray that as a community we may know God’s everlasting hesed, God’s merciful love. Praying this psalm reminds us of our intimate unity as a community of faith. The refrain and this final verse are an anticipation and unlimited extension of what we will express later in the liturgy with the sign of peace.

HEBREWS 4:14-16

When the readings from Hebrews for the 28th and 29th Sundays of Ordinary Time are taken in isolation, these two verses hardly seem to follow the ones that we heard last Sunday. Now, we are no longer talking about the quick cutting word of God, but Jesus, the ultimate high priest. At the same time, this reading calls forth as much imagination as did last week’s passage.

The author, appropriately referred to by various commentators as the pastor, begins by calling to mind our great high priest who passed through the heavens. Although some Jewish literature depicted heavenly journeys, the point here is a comparison between Jesus and the traditional high priests of Israel. For the Jews, the Temple symbolized the place where heaven encountered earth; when the high priest passed through the different areas of the Temple it represented the journey through different realms until reaching the holy of holies where God dwelt. When the pastor says that Jesus passed through the heavens, he means that instead of the high priest’s symbolic journey from the profane world into the holy place in the Temple, Jesus literally passed from this world into the living presence of God. He is therefore the high priest par excellence.

The pastor also makes a point of calling Jesus the Son of God. His proper name underlines his historical existence while the title Son of God proclaims faith in who he is in cosmic reality. This is the confession to which we are to hold fast: Jesus, who died like a criminal, is the risen Son of God.

Then, newly underlining Jesus’ earthly experience, the pastor explains that the man Jesus was human in every way, even unto temptation. When the pastor says that Jesus “sympathizes” with human weakness, it doesn’t simply imply that Jesus understands; the word he used conveys the idea that Christ feels human need so deeply that he is all but compelled to do something about it. According to Gordon Cockerill in *The Letter to the Hebrews*, that experience-based sympathy becomes an offer of grace. Those who avail themselves of it will receive not only forgiveness but also the capability to share in Jesus’ own victory over temptation.

The gist of this two-verse reading is thus to reassure us of who Christ is and what that means for us. With all the awesome majesty implied with language of the high priest traversing the heavens, the ultimate point is that we can approach God with confidence, knowing that Christ feels with us and awaits us as the source of grace and mercy.

MARK 10:35-45

Today’s Gospel begins immediately after Jesus told the disciples for the third time that he was going to suffer and die and that all of it was happening under God’s providence. Just as his final passion prediction (Mark 10:32-34) was the most detailed, so Mark makes this story of the disciples’ incomprehension the most egregious.

Jesus had ended his teaching about riches and poverty with the pronouncement: “But many that are first will be last, and [the] last will be first.” (Mark 10:31). That was the entrée to his declaration about the immanence of his suffering. For some mindboggling reason, James and John decided that this was the right time to jockey for position in what they thought of as his coming glory. Less subtle than the enemies who used to try to trap Jesus, these two sounded like a couple of kids playing “Simon says” as they bid Jesus, “Tell us you’ll do anything we ask!” Jesus made them spell out exactly what it was that they hoped for. When they came clean about their shameless ambition he told them that they had missed the point of everything he had been saying and that they surely had no clue about what they were asking him to do. He then spoke of the suffering he had been foretelling as a cup that he would drink and a baptism he would go through.

Responding as if he were talking about having a pool party, the two claimed they were ready to join him in the baptism and would be happy to share his cup. In reply, Jesus drove his point home by telling them that he had no say in the matter. If they stayed with him, they would share his fate, but glory was not his to hand out.

Ched Myers, Scripture scholar and author of *Say This to The Mountain: Mark’s Story of Discipleship*, describes Mark 8:22-11 as the “discipleship catechism.” He suggests that this interchange completes Jesus’ teaching about his alternative source and expression of power. Describing himself as “the Human One” or Son of Man, Jesus explains that the only way he can ransom the people is by being their servant, not their ruler. Little could his disciples imagine who would ultimately be on his right and left as he completed the baptism of the cross!

This week’s readings combine to ask us where we recognize images of God. Isaiah presents the suffering servant as the most iconoclastic image imaginable and a counterweight to the idolatry of inventing God in the image of our ambitions. The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that Jesus, the great high priest, passed to the highest position through his suffering and death and he is therefore able to understand our temptations and fears as he offers us the grace to deal with them. The Gospel offers James and John as mirrors of our own ambitions contrasted with Jesus’ description of himself as the servant-representative of the God who created for love, not glory. In the end, our ambition to achieve status or to serve will be the truest reflection of our image of God.

Planning: 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

The third Sunday of October is designated as World Mission Sunday. It is a day to remember the centrality of our call to spread the word of God to every creature and to invite all people around the world to live in God’s love.

That sounds like it should be an easy task, for who would really reject the idea of living in God’s love? Yet, we know that many people do reject it, not only in foreign lands but in our own communities and often in our own families.

There are various reasons for this, of course. Living in God’s love means rejecting the goals and standards of our society to a great extent. Our culture is often based largely on selfishness, getting as much of the world’s goods for ourselves as possible, regardless of the effect on others. That is the ultimate reason for all the wars and conflicts that fill the news every day and impact our own lives, along with all peoples worldwide in multiple ways.

Today’s readings remind us of the difficulty of living in love. The first reading speaks of the difficulty of living according to God’s will in a world that rejects God’s ways. The second reading reminds us that even our high priest had to suffer at the hands of God’s enemies. The Gospel speaks of the necessity of drinking the cup of suffering if we are to follow Christ, imitating him by serving and giving our lives for others.

We know this is the way to true happiness, but we are so easily tempted to embrace the ways of the world and turn away from God’s love. It is really only through the power of God’s grace that we can embrace the way of love that leads to eternal life.

This is a day to celebrate God's call to all people, to embrace the way of love and to offer our prayers and financial support to those who serve full-time as missionaries. Planners might ask themselves what can be done to help the parish appreciate more fully its own call to mission, its responsibility to spread the good news of Christ throughout the world, as well as in their own neighborhoods.

Can you decorate the entrances this week with large posters that invite people to embrace the task of mission? Are there missionaries (or former missionaries) in your area who might be invited to speak briefly at the end of Mass or after Mass at coffee hour? Does your parish twin with any mission parish or directly support a particular missionary? Can you shape petitions for the general intercessions this week that pray for mission work in various parts of the world — both foreign and domestic? How else can you raise mission awareness in your community?

Prayers: 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Peg Ekerdt

Introduction

In taking on humanity, Jesus became like us in all ways but sin. He experienced heartache and sorrow, joy and affirmation, challenge and rejection. He suffered many things, but his message never wavered. He came as a servant in our midst, willing to accept his human lot, to transform all things with his submission to the will of the Father. His message to his disciples is clear: If you want to follow me, you must be a servant to all.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you teach us to serve the needs of others: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you teach us that your mercy and grace is never ending: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you teach us that the first shall be last in the kingdom: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray for the needs of the church, of this gathered community and for our world.

Minister For the church, for the ability among us all to recognize the true power found in service to those most in need, and in faithfulness to the Gospel, we pray:

For our leaders and citizens, for perseverance in upholding the values of our founding fathers and mothers, to ensure the dignity of every human being, to promote the common good, we pray:

- For all who struggle with jealousy and rivalry; for those who promote themselves rather than seek the gifts of others; for openness to God's love and grace to fill our human need, we pray:
- For consolation found in the disciples' inability to grasp Jesus' true message; for continued effort on our part to never abandon our efforts to imitate Jesus' humility and service, we pray:
- In this month set aside for respect for all life, for the elderly, the poor and our children with special needs, and to know that all humanity — the child in the womb and the prisoner on death row — are the beloved of God, we pray:
- For the sick of the parish; for all who live with mental illness or who face addiction each day, we pray:

Presider God of kindness and mercy, help us remember that greatness is found in paying attention to the forgotten, and recognition in your kingdom is rooted in service to the least among us. We ask this in the name of Jesus, the suffering servant. Amen.

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