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Up to Jerusalem

Roger Karban Illustration by Mark Bartholomew | Oct. 20, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

We?ve finally reached Mark?s third way of dying with Jesus. There?s just one problem: Those who chose our Sunday liturgical passage failed to notice Mark?s prediction-misunderstanding-clarification pattern. They left out the prediction: ?They were on the way, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus went ahead of them. They were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. Taking the Twelve aside again, he began to tell them what was going to happen to him ...?

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Mark?s Jesus has about a week to live. No wonder his disciples are both amazed and afraid. What he says has deep implications for each of them.

Yet, in spite of this, James and John come up with a classic misunderstanding of Christian faith. ?Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left.?

The heart of Christian faith lies in Jesus? clarification of what it means to die with him. ?You know those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.?

Mark?s first way of dying with Jesus is to be completely open to whatever God asks; his second, to accept even the most insignificant persons into our communities on an equal footing with everyone else. His third revolves around how we look at our entire lives, our purpose for being on Earth.

By referring to himself as a ransom for many, Jesus is saying he finds his value in the value of those he serves. If he?s important, it?s only because he serves important people. Nothing could be more revolutionary.

We have nothing or no one to whom we can compare the makeup and operation of our Christian communities, no one except Jesus of Nazareth and how he related to those around him. We?re to pattern our lives not on a set of dogmas, or the teachings and regulations of an institution, but on a person: an exceptional individual who believed his life?s mission was to serve, not be served.

No wonder Jesus only has a week to live. He?s turning the religious and civil leaders? world upside down.

Because most of us are accustomed to regarding Jesus? death as a vicarious event, we don?t realize the uniqueness of someone giving one?s life as a ransom for others. How can one person?s suffering and death take the place of another person?s suffering and death?

The sixth-century-B.C. disciples of Deutero-Isaiah seem to be among the first biblical people to have developed a theology of vicarious suffering. The prophet?s martyrdom prompted them to compose what we today know as the Fourth Song of the Suffering Servant -- a small portion of which comprises our first reading. Without having our faith in an afterlife, they tried to understand how Yahweh could have created such a calamity.

Eventually these anonymous writers were inspired to see the prophet?s death as an event that affected their own lives for good. ?Through his suffering,? Yahweh states, ?my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear.? The life they now experience is more fulfilled and less sinful because of Deutero-Isaiah?s death. He?s helped them create a better relationship with Yahweh and one another than they ever had before.

This song quickly became a first-century Christian favorite. Jesus? death and resurrection also brought them life -- not just a promise of life after physical death, but life right here and now. He had actually ransomed them from a sin-filled, frustrating existence by showing them how to serve others.

Recent changes in eucharistic wording have triggered a debate over the actual number of people for whom Jesus died. Did he ransom all, or just many?

Interviewed years ago during an ABC television special on the historical Jesus, famed Scripture scholar Dominican Fr. Jerome Murphy-O?Connor was asked the same question. His surprising answer: ?Probably about two dozen.?

The historical Jesus died because it was the only way he could be faithful to that small handful of women and men who actually dared follow him. If he ran away or ?turned state?s evidence,? he wouldn?t have kept faith with those who had committed themselves to his dream of surfacing God?s kingdom among them.

Those two dozen soon multiplied. And each new disciple -- even those who never came into contact with the historical Jesus -- eventually began to understand he also died for her or him. They, like we, became part of something that went beyond just one historical period.

If all are willing to die with him, then he died for all.

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