

**Sermon for Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> October 2021 (Trinity 20) 'What is the path to greatness?'**  
from Fr. Mike

**Job 38.1-7; Hebrews 5.1-10; Mark 10. 35-45**

**James and John (10:35-40)**

Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem and confront the temple-based aristocracy. James and John request privileged places of authority in seats at Jesus' right and left. In doing so, the sons of Zebedee appear to have missed everything Jesus has said and done so far, except maybe for the transfiguration. They recognise that glorification awaits Jesus. The authority he has exhibited in his ministry will lead to something big, perhaps to a royal rule, and they conspire to capitalise on that.

When Jesus softly chastises the two for their ignorance and speaks about "the cup" he must drink and "the baptism" he must undergo, he reiterates that violence and death await him in Jerusalem. Mark's Gospel emphasises that such rejection and death are inevitable and indeed required, because of who Jesus is, because of the boundary-breaking character of his ministry, and because those who wield power in the world will do all they can to protect themselves and their prerogatives from the implications of that ministry.

**Tyrants, Servants, and Freedom (10:41-45)**

Jesus addresses the desire for power and prestige. James and John are not the only disciples enticed by visions of a triumphant reign, for the rest of the Twelve fume over the brothers' bid to outflank them in prominence. Jesus corrects their vision by holding up the conventions of gentile (Roman) socio-political authorities as negative examples. They regularly "overpower" and "tyrannise" others (10:42). They rely on coercion and control to maintain their dominance and prerogatives.

In absolute contrast, greatness among Jesus' followers is measured by their ability to live as servants and slaves, even if that life means suffering oppression at the hands of those who wield power.

Jesus' final line, 'For the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto but to minister (serve), and to give his life a ransom for many' connects to his preceding words about service and enslavement, indicating that his death will be exemplary for such a way of living.

At the same time, Jesus' mention of a 'ransom' indicates that his death will be more than just an inspiring example or a martyr's tragic protest against an unjust system. The word in question (in Greek, *lytron*) indicates that his death *does something*; it secures a release. This verse often sparks lively debates, and it has a history of, in my opinion, being misunderstood by those who take the notion of a 'ransom' to mean a specific type of *payment*. In those readings, Jesus' death is transactional, a payment made to satisfy the penalties accrued by human sin or to repay something owed to God. However, the explicit context in which this statement appears is more about power and servitude, not the problem of sin or the need to secure forgiveness. Furthermore, the Old Testament usage of *lytron* sometimes refers to a redemption or purchased freedom, although just as frequently refers to God acting to deliver people. A *lytron* is therefore a **liberation** wrought by divine strength, not by payment.

Jesus declares (without stopping to clarify precisely how) that God, through Jesus' death, will free people from oppression and captivity to another power, restoring them to membership in the community that corresponds to God's reign. All this provokes a few questions:

1. *From whom or what does Jesus' death deliver people?* According to the immediate context, it delivers from the combinations of social and political power that human beings concoct to control each other. According to the wider sweep of Mark's Gospel, it delivers from demonic powers that enslave the world and resist God's purposes. According to the story of the passion and resurrection, God defeats the power of death itself.
2. *What about sin and forgiveness?* The Gospel of Mark promises forgiveness, to be sure. Repentance and forgiveness are part of Jesus' proclamation and ministry. Mark presents these topics as subordinate pieces in a more comprehensive apocalyptic showdown, that sees the cosmos and human existence transformed by the incursion of God's reign and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
3. *Who benefits?* The mention of Jesus as a ransom on behalf of *many* emphasises the contrast between *many* and *the one* who acts on their behalf. Here, 'many' has the sense of 'all' or 'everyone,' which is in keeping with the cosmic scope of Mark's apocalyptic drama.

Today we see Jesus making comments within a much wider context, one that acknowledges the lure of power that ensnares all of us, not only James and John.

Note that this passage and the wider Gospel of Mark acknowledge various kinds of oppression that afflict us and that we employ to inflict upon our neighbours.

**What does it mean for us to imitate Jesus, who becomes relinquished to the designs of his powerful enemies?**

And how do we, where we live, experience the realities of the multifaceted liberation that God has accomplished for us through the death of Jesus Christ, and not through our own success or failure at adopting the role of a servant to others?

### A practical illustration

#### **Should I wear a face mask/shield indoors or not?**

At this point in our history, there are many opinions and strategies offered concerning the 'right' thing to do as we each try to get on with life in the middle of a disruptive and frightening pandemic. The wearing (or not) of face masks/shields has rapidly become a much-debated issue. For instance, if our present government are to be believed, then it will apparently be a simple case of 'personal responsibility.' Some senior clergy and other leaders prefer to leave it to 'personal choice.' Medical opinion is equally divided.

There is not enough data to be sure, although our clever senior scientists concur that it is almost impossible at this stage of the pandemic to identify those people among us who are without symptoms of Covid 19 yet may 'carry' (pass on) the virus or its variant. This is of course a real danger. It is also widely acknowledged that wearing a face mask/shield does not protect the person who wears it. Rather, **it protects everyone else** from imbibing the everyday droplets from others, which might transmit, and consequently spread, this dangerous virus.

The vast majority in our recent survey have registered their cautious approach, and a willingness to endure the mild inconvenience suffered by a mask, for the sake of others.

Indeed, if we take the second and 'greatest' commandment seriously ('[Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself](#)') on which all Christian law and prophesy rests, then this must surely be our abiding benchmark. However, if you are not overly bothered about your neighbour, then you will be one of those people who choose to no longer use a mask or shield.

**Conclusions:** The disciples learned an important lesson about Jesus, about greatness, and the "no needs" that day. They learned that a consistent, sincere lifestyle of putting others first, while placing their own desires and ambitions on hold for the benefit of the Kingdom, was the path to true greatness. No need for any other path. Amen!

Fr. Mike - Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> October 2021 (Trinity 20)