

PENTECOST XXI 17 October 2021

**A Homily preached by the Reverend Roger B. White in St Mark's Church,
Bridgewater, Connecticut**

Isaiah 53.4-12; Psalm 91.9-16; Hebrews 5.1-10; Mark 10.35-45

When, last week, Fr David invited me to preach on this morning, I said, 'Sure'. Then I looked up the readings that we were to hear, first read over the Gospel passage, and thought, 'Wait a minute I just preached on this a couple of weeks ago ...'.

And then I realized, No, I had last month preached on Jesus' second prediction of what would happen to him when he and his disciples reached Jerusalem, and today we were to hear the third time that Jesus would make his prediction and the third time we would hear how the disciples had reacted.

And that was when it occurred to me that there is something remarkably consistent in the way that Mark's Gospel handles Jesus' three predictions of his passion that sets this Gospel apart from the others. In Mark's telling, each time that Jesus warns The Twelve about his impending passion and death, they seem willfully to ignore his point. The first time (we heard about this more than a month ago), just after Peter has blurted out his realization that Jesus is the Messiah for whom the Jews have been awaiting, Jesus predicts his suffering and death in Jerusalem.

Peter's response is quietly to chide Jesus that this ridiculous prophecy is needlessly scaring him and the other guys, and so Jesus loudly denounces Peter as Satanic, looking out for his own ambitions and not for God's purposes. Jesus then tells The Twelve and everyone else that, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'.

This embarrasses each of The Twelve, and so the next time that Jesus makes his prediction (we heard about this when last I preached) all of the disciples begin to debate (out of Jesus' hearing they suppose) which among them is the greatest --that is to say, which of them gets to be the boss when Jesus is gone. (At least they now appear to take seriously that Jesus' prophecy may be accurate.) Jesus' frustrated response is to take a child in his arms as he tells them that 'whoever wants to be first must be last of all and a servant of all', including the neediest.

And today we hear Jesus' third and final prediction of his looming fate. Mark reminds us that Jesus and The Twelve have almost arrived at Jerusalem and that the disciples are by now beyond fearful. Which is when the two sons of Zebedee, James and John, truly terrified and wanting the matter to be settled in their favor, boldly step forward and ask if they can be the ones to sit at Jesus' right and left hands when he enters into his glory, the new political kingdom that they want him to create once he ousters the Herods and the Romans. Given that Jesus is soon to be crucified between two bandits, one on his left and one on his right, it is more than clear that James and John have no ideas hat they are asking, what 'glory' in Jesus' understanding means, even as with naked ambition they insist that they do understand.

The other Ten are enraged by the gall --the *chutzpah*-- of the Zebedee brothers, and Jesus cuts off everyone's bitter bickering by being his most emphatic. You are acting like clueless Gentiles, he tells them, and not like Jews seeking God's will and not their own wills. Whoever among you wants to be great in the world that is to come must become not merely a servant but also even a slave of all. For, the Son has come into the world not to be served but to serve, to give up his life in order to show God's love for God's creatures who over and over again seek out what they think is important and not what God keeps telling them is of inestimable worth. They pray 'thy will be done', but hope that what they prefer will happen.

It strikes me that Mark uses these three predictions of the Passion, and the terrified reactions of The Twelve, to illustrate how our pervasive human ambitions consistently steer us wrong, keep us from hearing and seeing what God is doing around us. Mark uses Jesus' escalating clarity when responding to the deafness of The Twelve as to what he is teaching to lead us to what we need to learn from the approaching Crucifixion. God wants to work through us --through human flesh-- which means serving one another and not only ourselves.

And finally, Mark uses these three stories increasingly forcefully to teach us what we need to see in the Crucifixion, with which his Gospel sharply ends. We need to see a Son who goes silently to a gruesome death --just as the 'suffering servant' in the reading from Isaiah describes. We need to see a High Priest who sacrifices nothing and no one other than himself on behalf of those whom God loves, in order to teach them what it is to be a servant --as the Letter to the Hebrews insists.

Mark invites us to come to the revelation that no one amongst the the ambitious Twelve has at the foot of the cross, but that rather comes to the nameless Gentile centurion, who exclaims that this quiet and selfless sacrifice was of the Son of God.

You see, the 'glory' into which James and John, the Zebedee brothers, try to muscle themselves is not the celebrity, prestige, and power for which they hope, but is a gruesome death --not reigning on a golden throne but rather suffering on a bloodied cross. Jesus' death is a death to selfishness. It is a willingness in human flesh to allow God to work through him, through us, to show how God seeks to change the world.

Which is why the old prayer still sometimes used at the end of Eucharistic services continues to resonate: 'Blest, praised, and adored be our Lord Jesus Christ, on his throne of glory, in the most holy Sacrament of the Altar, and in the hearts of his faithful people. Amen.