

29th Sunday of the Year 2021

Isaiah 53, Hebrews 5, Mark 10.35-45

Mark's story of the Sons of Zebedee and their question is a type of his whole gospel. What looks like an ordinary request is turned on its head both by Jesus and his reply, and by the gospel as a whole. James and John ask to sit with Jesus in his glory, but the New Testament's word for "glory, is extremely loaded. The Greek word "doxa" literally means the way something seems, and so we have to think of glory, in the gospels, as something we could expect to see. The gospel passage we heard provides a summary of the ways in which Mark uses this double meaning to centralise the glory of the Christ crucified.

In short, what we have in this story is a contrast of images. James and John approach Jesus with a request: grant us to sit, one on your right, and the other on your left, when you come into your glory. And Jesus responds that, although they will share his suffering at a later time, the places on the right and

left of the Messiah in his glory have already been prepared for others. As so often in Mark, we cannot understand until we have reached the end. Visualise the crucifixion. What can you see? The Son of God, glorified in death. Lifted up from the world to draw all people to himself. And on either side of him, a thief. Who are those who sit at Jesus' right and left hand when he comes into his glory? They are those who are crucified with him, those whose dubious privilege is to hang in agony as the gift of life gasps slowly away.

Mark follows the irony of the question and answer with Jesus' reminder that the Christian call is one of service. The archetype for such service is Jesus' own self-offering. The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. That little passage, along with the excerpt we heard from Isaiah and the short reading from Hebrews, has been treated almost to death by Christian theologians writing about what we call the "atonement", the bringing about of our redemption by

God's action in Christ. Atonement is a strange word, not least because it is an old word English in its etymology – at one ment. But the other words we use to talk about this aspect of Christian teaching can be equally problematic: salvation is being saved. From what, or from whom, are we saved? Redemption means being bought back. To whom is the price being paid? And what is the price?

These questions form what theologians call soteriology, the study of salvation, and that study tends to take the form of an analysis of metaphors and images to decide which are best to communicate the saving work of Christ. Contrary to popular opinion, scripture does not speak of Christ being punished for our sins. Rather, when the New Testament and the Christian Fathers talk of Christ in our place, the language they adopt is that of sacrifice. This is not punishment language – sacrificed animals were not being punished, they were being offered, and what was being offered in them was life. When Jesus describes

his own death as a ransom for many, he is tapping into this sacrificial world of offering life on behalf of others. More explicitly, the writer of Hebrews compares Jesus' ministry to that of the High Priest who alone could enter the Holy of Holies and make the necessary offering on the Day of Atonement. Christ having made this perfect offering in himself, the writer argues, all may now draw near.

Why should this be the case? The key to the death of Christ is not to forget his life, and so the key to the doctrine of redemption is not to forget the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation. Human beings are made in the image of God, they are made to imitate the Trinity, the life of God which is nothing other than the perfect offering of love. Human beings are not very good at this imitation. Instead of being selfless, they are self-centred, instead of life being nothing other than giving, it is all too apt to be nothing other than taking. In the miracle of the incarnation, God takes our nature upon him in order to transform it, in order to offer for us the perfect human life which we are

unable to give for ourselves. The life of Christ is then the life of the Trinity lived out on earth, a life which is wholly and perfectly given in love. As Paul observes in Philippians, this involves giving himself in entirety, giving himself to the point of death, and beyond. The life of Christ and the death of Christ are, in that sense, one and the same – they are the perfect life perfectly given, poured out, in love for you and for me.

It is sometimes maintained that we need to hold a punitive account of Christ's death in order to take seriously the reality of human sin. Such a notion entirely misunderstands the doctrine of the incarnation. It is precisely because of the seriousness of human sin, precisely because we are not able to overcome it for ourselves, that God takes our sin upon him, that God crucifies our sin by offering not a flawed and diminished human life, but a perfect life, a life with nothing to gain, a life which, in that sense, is as selfless as it can possibly be. The reality of human suffering which God embraces is essential- as Hebrews has it, "For we have not a high priest who is unable to

sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin”, - but this suffering is not about appeasing divine wrath or satisfying punitive justice, it is about accepting our state in all its mess and violence and pain and sharing it, transforming it in love whilst continuing to embrace it as long as you and I and the rest of the world remain efficient at hating and at killing one another.

The climax of the gospel of Mark is the glory of Christ revealed in his self-offering on the cross. That cross of Christ is the source of all life not because of some strange transaction, but because your life and mine is being offered in an act of perfect love which transforms our nature from being merely human to being once again the children of God, made in his image. This transformation, this divinisation, is the decisive act of God – God changes human life by offering human life. On that cross sin and death are once and for all defeated, because they are drowned in the ocean of God’s love, an act we imitate in baptism and make present in this eucharist. And the truly extraordinary

thing is that our determination to go back to sin, to continue with the hate and the lies and the violence, can not reverse the victory of the crucified God, because it is precisely in embracing evil and suffering that the love of God is revealed in all its human weakness, and all its divine power.