

Pentecost 21b, October 17, 2021

Mark 10:35-45

LFLC

A quick look at today's First Reading from Job 38.

At first glance, the Book of Job seems to be about
Job's heroic perseverance in the face of senseless loss.

But when we look closer, we discover that the book
is less about Job and more about God—
and about the need to place complete trust in God—
in the God who is beyond our expectations. . .
the God who surprises, startles, shocks, even scares us
with unpredictable mystery and power.

There is an old gospel hymn that describes a conversation with God this way:

“I come to the garden alone when the dew is still on the roses,
and the voice I hear falling on my ear, the Son of God discloses;
and he walks with me, and he talks with me. . .”

Well, while such an image might sound comforting and pleasant to us,
to Job it would sound ludicrous—for according to Job—
or, more accurately, according to God in Job—
sentimental songs that picture cozy chats with a domesticated God
are not only misguided but even dangerous.

In fact, as Job found out, having a conversation with God
is something one would rather avoid. . .and that being touched by God,
being called by God, even being loved by God,
is rarely, if ever, easy or comfortable.

This morning's reading from Job is the beginning of a 4-chapter speech
in which God rips off some of the most magnificent poetry ever written—
a thundering string of images that awaken in the hearer and reader
some inkling of God's awesome power—
a power so compelling, so dramatic and so cosmic
that Job, and you and I, can only shut out mouths and be still;

and, in the end, must bend our wills to God's, and, believe,
despite the evidence to the contrary, that God knows and rules all,
and that true comfort can only come from trusting
in the incomprehensible and unmanageable wisdom and providence of God.
A quick peek at today's Second Lesson from Hebrews 5.

These verses from the author of Hebrews tell us that Jesus,
who though he was God's Son, that Jesus learns obedience through suffering
and so becomes the “source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”

Here Christ the High Priest is described as vulnerable to human weakness and, as a result of that weakness—and not because of superior strength—is “able to deal gently with the ignorant and the wayward.”

To put it in terms that apply specifically to our lives, we might say that common character defects such as ambition, temptation, fear and anxiety are, at the same time, springboards for growth—that it is through our human weaknesses that we learn compassion and obedience, qualities required of those whom God calls as priests.

Thus, rather than removing us from the list of priestly candidates, it is our very humanity with its attendant weaknesses and temptations—it is our frailty as human beings that make us good and holy priests who, like our great high priest, can deal gently with those who give into temptation and fail to overcome their weaknesses.

To put it in its simplest form: Both obedience to God and compassion toward others are best taught by personal suffering.

And now, today’s Gospel reading from Mark 10.

Imagine that your best friend has just told you that she has inoperable cancer and will be dead within months and you reply: “Oh, I’m sorry to hear that but would you leave me something in your will?” To say that such a response would be insensitive would be to greatly understate the matter.

In today’s reading, the disciples are exactly that insensitive since Jesus has just told them that he is about to be arrested, tortured and murdered. . .and they have the nerve to ask him what he will do for them when he enters his glory and takes over the rule of his kingdom.

And the reason they ask such a thing is because, like most of us, James and John fail to understand that Jesus’ definition of glory is utterly and entirely bound up with his being crucified. . . and that, for him, giving up his life is the way to give life. . . that “losing” to death is really winning. . . and that, through his weakness, God’s strength will be shown.

Now, James and John can’t imagine that crucifixion is any possible way to glory because they are dazzled by earthly ideas of glory.

And that confusion is only natural.

After all, they are simple fisherman who have worked hard their whole lives for very little in the way of luxury and comfort.

And so it is quite natural for them to imagine that when Jesus comes into his glory, it will be something like being made emperor of Rome. With that in mind, they believe that if they are the ones seated at either side of Jesus, that they will have direct access to the ear of their Lord who is now ruler or king. And when it comes to power and influence—and potential profit—direct access is no small advantage—for their family and friends and, of course, for them personally.

After all, if an emperor can turn a commoner into a prince simply by a decree—or, like Nero who appointed his horse to the Roman Senate—just imagine the goodies the Son of God could give to those who are near him. . .who are at his right and left hand.

In other words, James and John think exactly the way the world thinks about power and glory—and act exactly the way people who live in the world act if they want power and glory.

And so what they do, first and foremost, is to seek an advantage for themselves at the expense of others. They don't want to have to share their influence with anyone, not even with their friends with whom they have been through so much.

And if you think the other disciples are any different, guess again. In fact, it seems to be the case that the ten are angry with James and John, not because of what the brothers asked for, but because they asked first.

You see, human beings operate in this world using the following equation: There is only so much to go around, and so, if you get something, that means there is less for me. . .which means if there are limited resources, then I need to fight to get mine.

So, what is at the root of this constant striving and struggling and straining for every advantage is the ever-present fear of losing—of losing what I think should be mine. . .and losing something to you or others that I was to get for myself.

Therefore, if losing is our greatest fear, then it is no surprise that, in this society anyway, we praise winners—and winners are those who grab first, who grab the fastest. . .and the mostest. . . who get the gold medal for greed.

What is ironic, however, is that this whole struggle to be a winner. . . to be on top. . .to be anything but a loser. . .actually turns us into losers—

into people who lose our relationship with God
 because we are convinced that God is holding something back from us;
 people who lose our friends because our relationships with others
 are fractured and broken. . .often unrepairable;
 people who lose respect for ourselves when we discover
 the lengths to which we will go to crawl over others
 in order to get what we want for ourselves.

Thus, it is precisely the need or hunger to be a winner
 that leads us to sell our souls for the illusion of power and glory
 and to spend our lives in the search for a counterfeit glory.

In a sense, the story of those who seeks worldly gain at all costs
 is the age-old story of King Midas who craved wealth at all costs.
 Unfortunately, for him, his heart's desire was granted
 and everything he touched turned to gold—
 to cold, beautiful, lifeless gold—including the food he tried to eat
 and his beloved daughter he tried to hug.

Those who seek glory the way the world defines glory soon discover,
 as did King Midas, that what is gained is worthless
 and what is lost is priceless.

And isn't it ironic that when Jesus finally does come into his glory,
 there are two people who end up at his right and left—
 only they aren't James and John but two dying thieves?
 In fact, when Jesus is crucified and enters into glory,
 James and John are nowhere to be found.

They could not and would not drink the cup Jesus drank—at least not then.
 They could not and would not be baptized
 with the baptism Jesus underwent--at least not then.
 But eventually they would. . .and eventually they did. . .
 and eventually so must all of us who choose to follow this Jesus.

For, you see, those who choose to drink that cup of suffering—
 as Job and Hebrews tell us clearly—
 are those who surrender their wills to God,
 just as Jesus surrendered himself and drank.
 In the same way, to share in Jesus' baptism—
 that is, to be dipped into the icy waters of death of self
 and to be brought up, gasping and sputtering into a new life in Christ—

to share in Jesus' baptism means to let go of ourselves
 and our yearning for earthly advantages. . .and to trust
 completely and and totally in the power and promise of God to deliver us.

Obviously, such trust is not easy, nor do we learn it quickly.

In truth, a lot of life is spent “unlearning” most of what the world considers wisdom. . .as well as learning, and re-learning, what the world considers foolishness.

And what does the world consider wise?

Well, that you. . .that we. . .can. . .and deserve. . .to have it all—
and all you. . .and we. . .have to do to get it all
is just reach out and take it. . .grab it. . .
and, if need be, step on or over others to get a better grip on it.

But what Jesus is saying is exactly the opposite: “Give it up!” he says.

Give up the drive for personal honour or status or acclaim—
for all those perks that comes with being a winner.

Give it all up and take up instead the promise of God
that those who drink the cup of suffering with Christ
will also drink the cup of glory with him. . .
that those who are baptized into the death of Christ
will be raised to new life with Christ. . .

that those who become servants to others will set others free. . .
and those who give their lives for others will,
by that act of self-sacrifice, give life to others
while, at the same time and in the same way,
find life and freedom, joy and peace for themselves.

Once again, it is not easy to do that. . .to be that. . .which is why
that old African-American hymn we will sing in a moment says:

“Give me Jesus, give me Jesus,
you may have all the rest; just give me Jesus.”

And where do we find that Jesus—and his peace—
the peace that Job found—that peace which can only come
from surrendering our wills to God?

And where do we find that Jesus—and his compassion—
compassion, the writer of Hebrews says—that can only come
from our willingness to suffer with Christ and for others?

Where do we find that peace, that power, that glory, that joy Jesus had and gives?

Here, in this meal, at that table. . .for here, in Jesus’ body and blood—
those signs of weakness and death and loss—
in those gifts we are given new strength and courage,
a renewed faith in the promise of life, and the hope of glory.

So, come, all who are anxious, weak, lonely, troubled, beaten down, beaten up,
tempted, ambitious, fearful, broken, sick, weary, depressed or dying.

Did I miss anything. . .or anyone?

All of you, come and taste the bread of life;
come and drink the cup of salvation
and be filled with the glory, the power and the presence of God.

Amen. SDG