Mark 10:(32–34) 35–45

Other Lessons: Jeremiah 31:31–34; Psalm 119:9–16; Hebrews 5:1–10

“Are you able to drink the same cup and be baptized with the same baptism?” “oh, yes! We sure can!” answered confidently the 2 sons of thunder. They had no idea what they were asking or answering. In fact, they were totally unprepared for it either. For in a week or so, they will witness the horrible death of their master and they themselves, including the other 10, would run and deny him. They simple were not expecting anything like that. They did not expect pain or suffering or death, much less, death on the cross! Should they have? And indeed should we also be prepared?

The text we have begins with his third announcement of his demise and glory in Jerusalem. Three times Jesus tells them plainly that he will suffer and die AND rise again on the third day. And here he gives one of the most vivid description of what will happen to him, being handed to the gentiles, with mocking, spitting, and flogging. But the whole story is perplexing. The disciples seem to understand the impending danger that they will be in because Mark tells us in verse 32 that the disciples were amazed that Jesus would walk ahead of them as though he was eager to get to Jerusalem and embracing his own death. And we are told that they were afraid as they followed Jesus toward Jerusalem. But here’s the strange thing, in the midst of this growing angst and fear among the disciples, James and John dared to ask Jesus to grant them to sit beside him IN his glory (Matthew’s version records that the mother initiated this request first). They probably figured that they should take the advantage and ask this asap before the other disciples do the same. They were still trying to distinguish themselves as the greatest of them all.

They know that Jesus’ mission is coming to completion soon, but they did not know what or how this will come (though Jesus had already told them 3 times by now). Yet they know that “glory” is involved. That’s why they wanted to share in that glory when it comes. But what is glory? And is it something that can be granted to us (or is it something we would even want in the first place)?

Of course James and John didn’t quite understand what true glory is to begin with. Their understanding of glory is selfish and yet impersonal. It is impersonal because they want that glory by proximation, that is, they want that praise, honor, reputation, splendor, and achievement of Jesus without doing anything, but by simple being there beside him. You may wonder how that is a bad thing, because isn’t the grace of God all about giving us what we cannot achieve? That is true, but God desires to give it fully to us all, not merely by association. Moreover, this giving can only happen through the cross, which is what James and John wanted to bypass.

This is just my guess, but it is very likely that James and John did NOT take Jesus words about suffering and death too seriously. They probably thought that is was a “possible” outcome, given the fact that Jesus had been making enemies since the beginning, but he has never really gotten hurt and have escaped his enemies multiple times. Now he is going to present himself as the messiah in the city of God, as the true king in the city of David, surely the angels will protect him. Surely no harm will come upon him and those closely associated with him, and then glory will come upon them. They wanted glory without the cross, the kind of glory according to the flesh.

And this glory is selfish because it is for the sake of elevating oneself above others, even over the other 10 disciples. If they could stand or sit beside the king Jesus, then they will have authority over all others. They will command, they will rule, they will subjugate, they will dominate, they will overpower. Think of all the possibilities you have if you just sit next to the king! Being at the top is all that matters. Being ahead of others is what counts.

And finally their vision of glory is ultimately shortsighted. It is only for the here and now. It is a glory that will come and go, for a passing moment. Will this glory sustain them, their lives (not to mention those around them)? And even if they can sit at Jesus’ side until their old age, it is a glory that they cannot take with them to the grave. It is a glory that has an end. Indeed, some people are fine with that, because it is better than nothing, or so they think.

And of course, James and John were not the only ones with such mindset. The other 10 were furious when they heard it, because they too wanted such glory for themselves. It’s just that they did get to say it before, and now they lost the chance. How dare John and his brother request such a thing! We don’t want to be their underlings, listening to their orders and commands!

They requested honor and power and glory, but they will not get it. They will not get it because their request was according to their own sinful desires, for selfish and temporal gains. They will not get it because it cannot truly satisfy their want nor their need. It will not be granted them because ultimately they have not asked according to God’s will, but their own. And that’s exactly our problem. We may not be so bold and confident to make such a request like James and John, but we often pray that our will be done. We may not be asking glory according to the externals like James and John, but we certainly do pray that the cross may not befall us. Give us this day my daily bread and what I want, my will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Somehow we mix things up here and there. It is time to reflect, recheck, and perhaps repent of our ways, our thinking, and pray for God’s will be done in our lives.

Jesus shows us what true glory is when he was crowned and ascended on his throne, with one on his right and one on his left. Yes, that was God’s highest glory: the cross, the blood that flowed, with 2 other criminals at his side, and his life slowly but most assuredly fading. The crowds mocked him, some were disappointed, some were perhaps angry that they followed this guy for nothing. Even those two on his side railed at him. And the soldiers were simply doing their jobs and they couldn’t care less about some Jewish lowlife now condemned by the worst possible death ever. Who would ever think that this is glory or power or honor or anything that deserves praise? And yet that’s the glory of God because he came to serve. He came to serve us sinners by taking our sins upon himself. He came to serve with his very life, to give it as ransom for the whole world.

He does this so you may be saved from all your sins. And he does this so that you may also face all crosses in him. He has taken our guilt and punishment so that we may not fear the cross but to see it as God sees it, which glory in Christ. This glory consists in love, care, servitude, humility, abasement, all forms of good works according to your stations and callings in life. It is glorious not because your get praise from people, but because it is from God. That’s the difference and it’s a matter of right perspective. And this glory is not by proximation, but it is truly ours because we are partaking in Christ’s cross. When we were baptized in his death and resurrection, this life of the cross has already begun. Christ is still bringing new life to you every day of your life. Every morning is a glorious morning because you rise with Christ. Everything you do is glorious because Christ is working through you. The world may not see it. We ourselves may not see it. But it is true.

James and John requested honor and power and glory, and indeed they will get it, because they will partake of the cross. The cup they that will drink and the baptism that they will be baptized with is the cross of Christ. God doesn’t force them to go through this hellish experience because God himself went through it. Through Christ, the cross gives them and all his followers a new meaning. It is not torture, not punishment for sin, but service to our neighbor. It is not redemptive of course because Christ has done it already. But through us, we may bring this glorious joy to the world.

As we follow Jesus’ journey, we too are getting close to Jerusalem with Palm Sunday, maundy Thursday, good Friday, and finally Easter Sunday coming up next week. Like them we are amazed and afraid at the same time, but we can strive forward because Jesus is ahead, leading us through this valley of shadow of death.