

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)  
(Isaiah 53:10-11 / Mark 10:35-45)  
21.10.2018

When I opened my Bible to read today's gospel passage I found myself recalling a remarkable woman I once knew who would say of her son – causing him some embarrassment when she would say this in his presence: *He didn't ever get it easy. He got his vocation especially hard.* That woman clearly understood what the disciples didn't comprehend: namely, that to be configured to Christ is no easy thing. If I thought of this loving mother straight away that is because in Matthew's account of the same scenario we read today in Mark's gospel we are told that it was *the mother of James and John* who *requested special places for her sons, one at the right hand and at the other at the left of Jesus in glory.* It struck me that we have here two very different types of mother in these respective women: the mother of James and John and the woman whose memory comes back to me as I read today's gospel passage. The wise woman I had the privilege of knowing was evidently aware of a central insight that comes to us from the Sacred Scriptures which Mrs Zebedee seems to have ignored: namely, that the way to glory involves both suffering and death. There is no other way to share in Christ's glory than to enter into His *kenosis* – which can be understood as His self-emptying love. The Risen Lord leaves us in no doubt in this regard. The way which Jesus Himself had to traverse involved pain: *Was it not necessarily that the Christ should suffer and so enter into His glory?*

Two images are used in today's gospel passage. The image of drinking from the cup at which Jesus drank and the image of sharing in Christ's own baptism. Let me say a word about these two images.

### **The cup.**

Jesus asks James and John – and through the question He posed to them He asks this of us: *Can you drink my cup?* The cup from which Jesus was required to drink was one that He would have preferred to see pass Him by. We think of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane – a prayer in which He asked His disciples to accompany Him, feeling the need of their loving presence by His side and their comforting proximity to sustain Him in His agony. In His spiritual combat Jesus prayed: *Father, if possible, let this cup pass me by.* The cup referred to here was His passion and death upon the cross. Paradoxically, in the language of John's gospel, this harsh reality is referred to as Christ's *glorification*. But clearly Jesus' *elevation* or *exaltation* was not to be a gratifying experience for Him; quite literally it was to be a crucifixion. What John dares to speak of as Jesus' being *lifted up* is revealed in the gospels as being nothing other than a way of descent, lived in humility, involving an interior movement of profound self-emptying. The *throne* Jesus was asked to sit upon was no comfortable seat; the crown He was to wear was to be none other than a crown of thorns. Isaiah's *Servant Song* sings of the fact that *it was the Lord's will to crush His servant with pain.* Jesus' life which was taken from Him, at one level, was really not taken from Him at all, for, in Jesus' heart, His life was already entirely given to God's will ... and this whatever God's will would entail. In John's gospel Jesus states: *No one takes My life from me, for I lay it down of My own free will.* Jesus lived His death – His being robbed of life – as a free-will offering. Isaiah's insight that *He made His sacrifice as an offering for sin* is one that the New Testament writers take up, zoom in on and echo, applying it to Jesus. The epistle to the Hebrews does this especially. Isaiah doesn't hide the stark reality of the servant's vocation. The servant *will be led into anguish* and precisely from that perspective he *will be led to see*

God's own light and come to know God's will in peace. Isaiah says: *Out of his anguish – his soul's anguish over – he shall see the light and be content.*

When it comes to the call addressed us – the call to drink the cup – I find insights of the late Fr Henri Nouwen helpful. Here is what he has to say in his book *The Selfless Way of Christ*: *Some people wanted to make (Jesus) king. They wanted Him to show power. They wanted to share in His influence and sit on thrones with Him. But He consistently said 'no' to all these desires and pointed to the downward way: 'The Son of Man has to suffer... can you drink the cup? (...) Jesus leaves little doubt that the way He lived is the way He offers His followers: 'The disciple is not superior to his master' (Matthew 10:24). With great persistence He points out the downward way: 'Anyone who wants to be great among you must be your servant, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve'. (Matthew 20:26-28). The downward way is the way of the cross: 'Anyone who does not take his cross and follow in my footsteps is not worthy of me. Anyone who finds his life will lose it; anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it' (Matthew 10:39). The disciple is the one who follows Jesus on His downward path and thus enters with Him into new life. The gospel radically subverts the presuppositions of our upwardly mobile society. It is a jarring and unsettling challenge.*

We must ask ourselves honestly: are we willing to drink at Christ's cup? Sometimes His cup can come to us under the guise of what would call a *poisoned chalice*; we may be asked to drink what is not sweet wine, but bitter gall. To think in terms of willingly drinking at the cup can be for us, as Nouwen puts it, a *jarring and unsettling challenge*.

### **Baptism.**

The second image employed in today's gospel evokes for me one of the mysteries of Christ which I hold particularly dear: that of His baptism in the Jordan. A word about Jesus' baptism. Jesus divested Himself at that moment, He made Himself vulnerable when setting His garments aside to go down into the depths of the Jordan River. He did this out of solidarity with sinful humanity – represented by all those people who had come to John to receive a *baptism for the remission of sins*. Later on, at His passion, Jesus would be divested again; this time not by choice but by force. In His Sacred Passion Jesus was stripped of His garments to hang upon the cross naked – like all the crucified; He was exposed in this way as an added humiliation. Looking to the cross, we are given to contemplate Jesus shamed in the sight of all.

Just as Jesus did not stand apart from sinners who gathered on Jordan's banks to be baptised for the forgiveness of sins (even though He himself was sinless) – daring to identify Himself there with those broken people, that motley crew of shady characters who turned to John for help, who needed a *baptism of repentance for the remission of sins* – so, on Calvary's Hill, not only in the same way, but, we could say, in an even deeper and more costly way, Jesus showed Himself to be in full solidarity with fallen humanity... *bearing their injustices*, as Isaiah implies.

I wonder if we are really ready to live our baptism in the radical way Jesus challenged James and John to do. We must ask ourselves if we are ready to be baptised in the baptism in which Jesus Himself was baptised. I said *was* baptised, but it would be better to say *is* baptised, because Christ still lives His baptism in that of His disciples, of whom each one of us is to be counted.

We are told in the text we are considering how *when the ten heard of the conversation that had taken place between Jesus and the two disciples they began to be angry with James and John*. Their *righteous anger* is maybe not just as *righteous* as it might at first sound to us and/or as it may well have appeared to themselves. Let me suggest that the real issue for the ten was less to do with the fact that the James and John had sought to exploit their position of

easy access to Jesus to obtain some special favour for themselves than it was rooted in a certain annoyance that these two brothers had *beaten them to it*. James and John had *gotten in* before the ten managed to do so with a request for privileged treatment. The real issue is that the ten also wanted the best seats. We are told a little earlier, in the previous chapter of Mark's account, how *Jesus called all the disciples to Him to ask them what they had been arguing about among themselves on the road* leading up to Jerusalem. They were embarrassed to have to admit that the argument had been centred on the question *who was the greatest among them*. How sad is that! Men who had been called to humble service were seeking only honour for themselves. They had forgotten that true service is meant to be lived in humility of heart and in a spirit of self-forgetfulness. A true servant engages in service for the benefit of those served, not for him or her self. Jesus' words could not be any clearer: *You know how it is among the leaders of this world who vie for position and lord it over others; it is not to be that way among you*. True service for Jesus and for the Christian disciple is made manifest in loving self-gift. To serve is *give one's life*. Christian service is rooted in love. Is that not always what the true lover does? A true lover gives him or her self to their loved one; for their loved one. The true lover's deepest interest is the well-being of the one loved. A true servant will not be self-interested. To the contrary! A true servant, a good lover, will be self-forgetful.

I think today's gospel passage would have all of us ask ourselves some very fundamental questions about our inner disposition. It reminds us that the stance required of us is a completely different posture than that which we are inclined to take. Indeed, today's gospel implies that we are not meant to stand at all. What today's gospel shows us is that we are called to kneel in the foot-washing servant's posture. (The foot-washing servant was the last ranking servant – the least of all.) Today's gospel passage would have us assume the inner posture Jesus assumed on the eve of His passion when *He got up from table, removed his outer garment, donned the apron of humility and knelt before His disciples to wash their feet*.

Later on the disciples would see what, for the moment they still did not understand. They would see Jesus kneel before James and John and before the ten remaining disciples – showing all twelve how they should situate themselves in the apostolic service confided to them. All twelve had wanted honour; all twelve were called to service. Their honour was to be simply to serve. Jesus showed these men who were called to pursue His mission on earth after He had returned to the Father to live in glory that the truly honourable way to live one's life is to live it as Jesus lived His whole existence – in a posture of humility, in an attitude of loving service.

I come back to that woman I referred to in my opening words in this reflection in these words of conclusion. I always remember a card she once sent to her son. The card read simply *To love is to serve*. The inverse is also true: *To serve is to love*.

Loving service – this is what we are called to; this is a vocation we are to fulfil in humility of heart.

Let me draw this reflection to a close by referring you to a prayer by St Augustine which speaks beautifully of the call addressed to us to engage ourselves totally in the Lord's service, with mind, heart and will in accord. Augustine prayed: *Eternal God, who are the light of the minds that know You, the joy of the hearts that love You, and the strength of the wills that serve You; grant us so to know You that we may truly love You and so to love You that we may fully serve You, whom to serve is perfect freedom*.

It struck me as I listened to the *Collect* or *Opening Prayer* of this Eucharist that Augustine's formulated request ties in with that which the Church would have us ask for ourselves on this 29<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year having us pray: *Almighty. Ever-living God, grant that we may always conform our will to Yours and serve Your majesty in sincerity of heart.*  
Amen!