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Aquinas Institute Midday Prayer
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Mark 10:32-45

The disciples were on the way, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus went ahead of them. They were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. Taking the Twelve aside again, he began to tell them what was going to happen to him. "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles who will mock him, spit upon him, scourge him, and put him to death, but after three days he will rise." Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." He replied, "What do you wish me to do for you?" They answered him, "Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left." Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the chalice that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" They said to him, "We can." Jesus said to them, "The chalice that I drink, you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right or at my left is not mine to give but is for those for whom it has been prepared." When the ten heard this, they became indignant at James and John. Jesus summoned them and said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Preaching Notes

When I saw that the reading for today was the story of James and John, wanting to be on the right and on the left, my immediate response was one of weariness. It's a tale that seems to pop up all too frequently in the lectionary – perhaps because there are two versions of it: this one where James and John advocate for their own futures in the soon-to-be Kingdom of God, and Matthew's version where they get their mother to do their dirty work for them.

I weary of it because James and John always appear to me such shallow, two-dimensional creatures – buffoons really, not very worthy of my sympathies:

- Jesus tells them about what is going to happen in Jerusalem and it is as if they only hear the last line.
- They skip directly to the resurrection glory stuff and want in on it, elbowing their way to the front of the crowd.
- They come across as clueless, ambitious, and power hungry and I am simply left to wonder why Jesus ever let them into his inner circle of friends. He seems a poor judge of character.

But, I don't really believe that about Jesus.

And so I read it again and again, knowing that Jesus really loved these guys, and surely not just out of pity. They were among the first disciples he called. They were his closest friends. And, I find myself wondering about the complexities of their character that have been stripped away in order to highlight the stark moral point of the story. I wonder about the nuances that have faded, the humor in their voices that may have been lost. In my imagination, I want to put some flesh on their bones and fill out

their personalities – letting them emerge from the page as real persons – the kinds of persons that Jesus desired to hang with.

And when that happens, I begin to hear James and John in another way. Their words sound a lot like words I've heard myself speak. Words that most likely any of you could speak.... Anyone in this building could speak:

“Hey, Jesus, I believe in you and I believe in your Kingdom, and I want to help you with it. I want to be a leader in bringing it about. I don't want to just be a passive person in the pews. I want to be a mover and a shaker. I want to be right next to you, through thick and thin. I want to be on your core planning team. And I mean that not just for today; I mean that forever. I want to enter into your glory.”

Put that way, it doesn't sound quite so bad, does it? Isn't that what everyone in church leadership in every generation essentially says to God? Where would we be if no one volunteered for the inner circle? Certainly there are a thousand pastors out there who would be really happy to have someone step forward to be their right hand man, much less their left hand woman. Really, Christ, how lucky can you get?

Jesus' response to James and John, then, should not be read as a rebuke of buffoons, easily dismissed in its simplicity to apply only to those ambitious, power-hungry wanna-be bishops somewhere out there. No, we should probably think a little bit more deeply about what it has to say to us... people of (I like to think) good will, who've offered ourselves to Jesus to serve as leaders in his movement, supporting him from the left and from the right.

What clues does Jesus give about Christian leadership that it might behoove us to remember today? I'm hearing three:

- 1) **Be careful what you pray for.** As Jesus said to James and John: “You have no idea what you are asking for.” Or as my mother repeatedly said to me as a child: “Your eyes are bigger than your stomach.” The flush of zeal with which we turn ourselves over to Jesus often commits us to more than we are actually prepared for. We can quickly find ourselves in over our head, drowning in the duties and responsibilities of leadership. And, that's not a bad thing. If we knew all that lay ahead when we said “Yes!” to something, we would probably never leap into life with the gusto it deserves. We would never learn all the things we are invited to learn; grow all the ways we are invited to grow. We'd never become the people we are called to be. But, it is helpful to know at the beginning – you have no idea what you are getting yourself into and don't pretend that you do. Be open to the experience being different than you thought. Let go of your expectations.
- 2) **Leadership is born of the cup of suffering.** Even though we have read the Gospels a hundred times, like James and John, we generally only hear the parts of the story that we want to hear, or somehow think that we'll be able to exercise the escape clause when it comes to the Paschal Mystery in our own work. Real Christian leadership is going to be marked by suffering – it just

is. It is going to put us into situations of angst and decision-making that will cause us grief. More than that, it is going to put us in relationship with many, many people in the struggles of life. And whether we have authority in our positions or not, will depend on the degree to which we are willing *to suffer for* and *to suffer with* those we serve.

Suffering done resistantly turns potential leaders into frightened, smaller people, who need the accoutrements of power (special titles, special clothes, special seating arrangements and letterhead) in order to give a semblance of authority. But suffering done willingly with love gives potential leaders a kind of translucence, an inner authority that is magnetic and which people naturally follow. The crowds gather, “for he spoke as one having authority, and not as their scribes.” We must embrace suffering as an inherent part of our vocations to leadership.

- 3) **Leadership is a life of service.** It seems so straightforward and simple in the words of Jesus, that it hardly seems worth trying to explicate any further:

*“You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. **But it shall not be so among you.** Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve.”*

The genuine puzzlement to me here is that in my own – admittedly, very limited - experience growing up Catholic, I just have not seen this utterly straightforward instruction of Jesus lived out by many Church leaders I’ve known. For a long time, I self-righteously assumed it was willfully ignored. I don’t think that any more. I think most Church leaders do think that they are doing this, but either those of us in the proverbial pews just aren’t privy to see it or that leadership is by its nature an isolating experience that keeps us from being aware of how we appear... and it is so demanding an experience that – frazzled by time and money pressures – a service orientation begins to seem a luxury. Life genuinely looks different from the other side of the desk. Leaders are privy to information that others don’t have and are often judged harshly by those who don’t know. But people also have information that leaders don’t have, and leaders forget to ask.

I say this because Jesus’ teaching on this matter seems exceedingly straightforward, but clearly it is not when attempted to be put into practice. I don’t think any of us here who aspire to serve as Christian leaders would think of ourselves as anything other than servants of the people of God. So Jesus’ words probably don’t feel particularly challenging. But, given the long sordid history of primarily well-meaning Church leadership over the past 2000 years, we should probably still spend some time asking,

- “Although I think of myself as a servant, is this how people are experiencing me?”

- Has my experience of leadership so altered my access and my perception that I might not be aware any more of what it looks like from the other side?
- Am I aware of the small signals I send out that my paradigm of leadership is other than service based?" (eg. "I don't have time to help with emptying the dishwasher because I am about very important tasks and someone else can do that" something I have been very guilty of personally.)

The Irish poet John O'Donohue has a line in one of poems: "The duty of privilege is absolute integrity."

It is a very high bar to set. Too high for flat, two-dimensional caricatures, which is how leaders continue to often be portrayed by the storytellers of today in 30 second news clips. But for the fleshy, complicated friends of Jesus who have opened themselves to leadership roles in the support of his Kingdom, it is a bar we are capable of striving for, a bar the Gospel calls us to commit to.

St. John, St. James, pray for us.