

Our lectionary has eliminated the reason this Gospel is so poignant...

And he took again the twelve, and began to tell them what things should happen unto him. Saying, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests, and unto the scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles: And they shall mock him, and shall scourge him, and shall spit upon him, and shall kill him: and the third day he shall rise again.

First, we have a repeated prediction. The highway now led straight toward the goal—Jerusalem, the city that habitually stoned the prophets and killed those whom God sent to it. The Lord knew what He could expect once He appeared in that den of lions. His earthly pilgrimage was drawing to a close. There seems to have been a new, obvious resolution, firmness, and purpose about Him. As the Niagara River seems to quicken its pace and move forward with renewed force as it approaches the falls, so it was with the Lord. Those who followed Him sensed it and were awed by it.

“Up to Jerusalem!” The Jews always referred to it like that. The city stood on the highest point of the backbone ridge of hills that run north and south between the Jordan and the Great Sea. “Up to Jerusalem.” It was the only way to go. God had chosen it for that purpose. There the temple stood. It was appropriate that one should be conscious of putting his feet on higher ground when approaching a place like that—“the city of the great king,” as it is called.

This was the third announcement of His sufferings. He had mentioned them in Caesarea Philippi after Peter’s great confession of faith, and He had mentioned them again on the way home from the Mount of Transfiguration. This time would be the last time. It was not a truth that the disciples wanted to face.

We note the steady beat of the polysyndeton—“And! And! And!” Each individual suffering is marked out for emphasis, right on through death, without a pause in the beat, to resurrection! Men would do their worst. Then God would act. The resurrection of Christ was an inevitable as His death.

The first two announcements by Jesus about his death and resurrection had been very brief because that was all the disciples could take at that time: the leaders of the Jewish religious and governing establishment would kill Him, and He would rise again. Now He adds half a dozen more details, each one more horrifying than the one before. The final rejection would take place in Jerusalem, the nation’s capital, toward which He was now striding with such resolution. The Sanhedrin would condemn Him to death. Not content with that, they would hand Him over to the Gentiles. He would be mocked and scourged and spit upon and killed—He, the King of Glory.

Next, in today’s Gospel we have a resented petition from James & John. “Promise us something,” they said. But He was not about to write them a blank check so that they could fill it in for any amount they desired. They were too much out of tune with reality for that. Thus, they ignored what the Lord had been saying about the cross. Their sights were set on the crown. They wanted the crown without the cross. They were still thinking in terms of the kingdom, the power, and the glory. In spite of the Lord’s repeated references to the cross, they were apparently still expecting that the millennial kingdom was about to appear. This was their version, too, of Peter’s mistake at Caesarea Philippi, when he had taken the Lord aside to urge Him not to speak out any more about a **cross**. The kingdom and the power and the glory were not to be cancelled; they were to be postponed. The Lord knew this, James & John had not yet grasped.

Jesus says, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” The Cup! Oh, that cup! Gazing into it in Gethsemane would bring the blood sweat to His brow. No one but He on earth and His Father in heaven and the Holy Spirit in His heart could know the full horror of that cup.

And that baptism! He had begun His public ministry by being plunged beneath the chilly waters of the Jordan, thus to identify Himself with Adam’s ruined race, which He had come to save. Ahead lay a deeper, darker Jordan, the dark river of death. There He would be identified with the sins of the world. There He who knew no sin would be made sin

for us. There He, the Lord of life, would taste of death for every man. Whoever it is who wants to know the full terror of that baptism must fathom the depths of His anguished cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" The cup spoke of His inward sufferings; the baptism spoke of His outward sufferings.

When James & John answered Jesus "We are able." Theirs was the answer of ignorance. It is comparable to the abysmal folly of Israel when, presented with the law, declared, "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do." Israel, at that point, had not even heard what the law contained, still less had they questioned their ability to keep its commandments!

The Lord read the hearts of James & John. He foresaw their future as clearly as He foresaw His own. Of course, they could not drink the darkest dregs of the cup that was His or plunge beneath the judgment waters that awaited Him. But they could be martyred for His cause. And so they were.

There is all the difference in the world between salvation and rewards. Salvation is free; rewards have to be earned. Rewards are offered to believers as an added incentive to holy living. Although, there are those rare souls who receive great rewards-because they were not seeking anything but to do the will of God. The judgment seat of Christ is to be convened to deal with all of the issues involved in God's assessment of our lives as believers. Likewise, crowns are offered and set before us as something to be won. Surely, one of the highest honors must be to be seated alongside Christ Himself in the day of His glory.

"When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James & John." Peter was indignant. Judas was angry. Thomas and Matthew were put out. One and all, they had paid little attention to the Lord's announcement that He was on His way to the grave. And they had completely forgotten His teaching on being childlike and humble. How all of this must have grieved the Lord. Not only were they engaging in unseemly jockeying for position but also they were turning on each other in recrimination. The Lord remained patient.

The Lord sets His kingdom and its rulers apart from all of the kingdoms of this world. Those who aspire to positions of power in the kingdoms of this world vie for advantage. The Lord's spirit is different from that of the conquerors, rulers, and power brokers of this world as day is from night. SERVICE is the key word, humble service.

"For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many." Amazing! He came down here to SERVE.

What does it mean to be a servant? It means to put the needs of others ahead of your own. WE can be servants whatever our roles in life may be, and servants in and through those roles. Aren't medical doctors, whatever their professional qualifications, only as good as their sense of service? Isn't one of the signs of a lost culture the declining attention to service in all areas, and the parallel obsession with being served? Doesn't the request of James & John ring true in our time, two ambitious young men boldly asking for what they want? But don't the words of Jesus ring truer? "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

How are we remembered? Certainly many people are remembered in terms of their major achievements. "He was president of the bank." "She was the first woman senator from her state." Most of us, however, will be remembered in ways we would never imagine. "She cared of my child while I went to the hospital." "He wrote a reference letter for me when I applied to college." "She came and sat with me when my mother died." These are the little bits of mortar that hold the world together. These are the acts of service we ourselves have forgotten that were like the presence of Christ to someone else. Everyone knows what it means to be a servant. What we forget is that it represents our highest calling and the very meaning of our lives. Being a servant means pledging our time, talent, and treasure; that is true stewardship which is a part of our servant hood.

The Lord Jesus gives His life in SERVICE of the gospel, He gives His life in SACRIFICE. And what a life it was! It was a supernatural life. One glance from Him, and water blushed into wine. One word from Him, and the fiercest demons fled. One touch from Him, and a little lad's lunch becomes a banquet for more than five thousand.

It was a sinless life. Not once—in thought, word, deed, or hidden, secret desire, whether as a baby or as a boy, as a teen or a grown man, whether in the home or in the schoolroom, at the workbench or when tramping the highways and byways of His native land—did He ever sin. He was holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners.

It was a SUFFICIENT life. The Old Testament law said, “A life for a life.” Even at that, no man can provide a ransom for his brother because all have sinned. But even if such a one could be found, he could redeem only one life. The life that Jesus laid down on Calvary’s cross was no ordinary life; it was an eternal life, an infinite life. Therefore, it could atone for any number of finite lives. That is why the Bible can say of Christ that, “He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.” AMEN