

Why He Came

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Jesus Discoursing with his disciples | James Tissot | Brooklyn Museum | PD-US

The tenth chapter of Mark has been especially dense with preparing the disciples for the time when Jesus will no longer be with them as their teacher. Jesus will enter Jerusalem at the beginning of Mark Chapter 11. The terrible fate that Jesus has already predicted for himself awaits even as he strives to have the disciples more fully understand the meaning of the Kingdom. At a certain level, this scene is déjà vu – didn’t Jesus just have a discussion with the disciples regarding the true meaning of greatness as service to the least among us? Hasn’t he already told them that the path of discipleship will consist, not just of demonstrations of power (healing and casting out demons), but also one in which one “*must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.*” (8:34) Did they not draw any broader conclusion about the nature of the kingdom in Jesus’ exchange with the rich man (10:17-31)?

Although not part of the Sunday lectionary of gospel readings, there are three simple verses that come before our gospel account:

³² *They 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.* ³³ *“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* ³⁴ *who will mock him, spit upon him, scourge him, and put him to death, but after three days he will rise.”* (Mark 10:32-34)

This is the third prediction of the Passion – also “on the way (*hodos*)” and again the disciples are worried about who will receive glory and their blind ambitions. Next week’s gospel is the account of the encounter with Blind Bartimaeus who is “by the roadside (*hodos*)” (v. 46), and who, as a seeing man, follows Jesus “on the way (*hodos*)” (v. 52). The use of this word as “bookends” suggests that the disciples between these words are just as blind as Bartimaeus and they are not “on the way” with Jesus, but only on the sidelines. The “Way” points to the ultimate end of Jesus’ earthly life – Golgotha and the cross. Paradoxically, while James and John ask for glory, it is on the cross that the fullness of God’s glory will be revealed.

Whatever we ask

A key verse of our reading is when James and John seek glory: ³⁵ *Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”* ³⁶ *He replied, “What do you wish (me) to do for you?”* ³⁷ *They answered him, “Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left.”*

Even before the request is revealed, the very sound of the question seems brash: “*whatever we ask.*” It is as though they want a “blank check” from Jesus. Is it enthusiasm? Is it brazenness? Is it coming from a sense of “I deserve a reward for having followed you these many, many months?” Is it arising from a sense of “I have looked at the other 10 and we are the ones you should pick?” Hard to know, but in any event, Jesus simply asks them what they desire.

The request of the sons of Zebedee for places of honor in the glory of the Son of Man immediately follows Jesus’ announcement that they were going to Jerusalem and after three days the Son of Man will rise. “*Grant that in your glory...*” We often pass over these verses because we know the audacious thing they are going to ask. But consider this: they have accepted that Jesus will die and be raised from the dead, taking on again the glory that he had before the world was created! Jesus has already made it clear that the Son of Man will come in glory (*doxa*) in 8:38: “*Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this faithless and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of when he comes in his Father’s glory (doxa) with the holy angels.*” (8:38) Remember too that James and John had seen Jesus transfigured before them. They had a glimpse of Jesus’ glory with Moses and Elijah perhaps at his right and left (9:2-8). They are anticipating his ascending to the throne of heaven and/or the second coming. That is the glass-half-full take on things

The half-empty version is that Jesus is ever making things “clear” but the disciples – and especially the Twelve – remain blinded by their earthly expectations. Perhaps they only see as far as Jerusalem and the throne to be ascended is David’s. Their vision is the royal, conquering Messiah who will return Israel to its glory days of 1000 years past. The brothers are simply seeking rank and privilege.

³⁷ *They answered him, “Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left.”* ³⁸ *Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”*

The place of honor is the seat on the right, and next to it, the seat on the left (cf. 1 Kings 2:19; Ps. 110:1; and in non-biblical sources, 1 Esdras 4:29; Josephus, *Antiquities* VI. xi. 9). It seems almost impossible that these two disciples could ask such an ambitious and inappropriate question after Jesus

has been describing his way of suffering so clearly since 8:31. It is interesting to note that Matthew casts James and John in a better light, having their mother pose the request in Matt 20:20. Still, this incident reveals that in spite of Jesus' repeated efforts since Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi to let them know the cost of discipleship, the sons of Zebedee have understood his intention only superficially. Their ambitious request brings questions upon their commitment and discipleship, while the resentment of the other ten disciples reflects a similar preoccupation with their own dignity.

What Tone and Symbolism?

It would be good to know Jesus' tone of voice when he responds. Is it exasperation caused by their continuing blindness? Is it said as a tired sigh but with a willingness to again engage them and lead them to a deeper understanding and awareness? Does it have an edge? It might well be the simple inquiry to uncover what they understand: "*Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?*"

There are several lines of interpretation regarding Jesus' reply. Some scholars hold that the images offered ("drink" and "baptism") do not hold the same significance for the disciples as they do for Jesus. In this line of thought, the cup and baptism point to Jesus' voluntary obedience unto death for the sins of humanity; whereas, the images suggest the disciples' moral participation in Jesus' passion. [Lane, 379]. But the construct of the sentence is in the present tense. In other words, right at his moment, Jesus is drinking and being baptized. This seems to point to something other than a future moral participation in the Passion.

The "cup" (*potērion*) plays a prominent role in the passion. The cup of wine represents the blood Jesus will shed to establish the new covenant (14:24). Jesus' prayer to be spared the cup if it is God's will makes the cup stand for all the suffering of the passion (14:36). In the OT, the word for "cup" is used metaphorically to refer to divine wrath or punishment in response to sin and rebellion (Pss 75:9; Isa 51:17; Jer 25:15–16; Ezek 23:33). Thus Jesus might be said to drink the "cup" as the sacrificial victim whose death atones for the sinfulness that merited God's wrath (Rom 3:24–26; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13). But that view does not explain how the disciples can drink the cup. While their participation is not redemptive as is Jesus' they are being asked if they can accept the same kind of suffering that Jesus now faces.

The use of "baptism" in parallel with "cup" indicates that it is also a metaphor for suffering. Old Testament references to waters overwhelming the sufferer in lament psalms may have provided the origin for this metaphor (Pss 42:8; 69:3). In popular Greek usage the vocabulary of baptism was used to speak of being overwhelmed by disaster or danger. The two images together reinforce the suffering to come that Jesus will face and that his disciples will also eventually face. Hence the question is "*Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?*" To share one's cup was a recognized expression for sharing his fate.

Juel [*Mark*, Augsburg Commentaries] suggests a sacramental image with "cup" and "baptism":

"... While the term "baptism" could be employed in Greek literature to speak about being overwhelmed by catastrophe, the awkwardness of the phrase may suggest that it is chosen because of its place in the church's technical vocabulary. In Paul's letters, the rite of Christian Baptism is interpreted as sharing Christ's death (Rom. 6:1-5; in Ephesians 2 and Colossians 2, sharing in his resurrection as well)."

"It is tempting to speculate that the images of *cup* and *baptism* are chosen here in light of Christian ritual. Understanding Jesus' words to James and John does not require locating them within Christian tradition. The images of *cup* and *baptism* are sufficiently clear by themselves. In view of that tradition as it is known elsewhere in the New Testament, however, it is

tempting to speculate that Jesus' words represent an effort to understand more deeply what is implied in the church's sacramental practices. In Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the faithful share Christ's destiny. That is precisely what James and John want -- and it is precisely what they fail to understand. They know that the kingdom will come; what they do not grasp is how and at what cost. [pp. 146-7; *found in Stoffregen*]"

They may not know the way or the cost, but as Perkins [654] notes: "Jesus' prophecy concerning the martyrdom of James and John reminds the reader that the failures of the disciples during Jesus' lifetime are not the final word about their faithfulness as followers of Jesus. Although they will run away during the passion, these same disciples will later share the suffering of Jesus."

Jesus' Reply

The two apostles respond: "*We can.*" Jesus said to them, "*The cup that I drink, you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized;*⁴⁰ *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.*"

In response to their eager "*We can*" of v.39, Jesus divides the issue: You shall share in my cup, in my baptism, in my death. But it is up to someone else, my Father, to give out the seats of glory! (v. 40). The disciples have just been described as a fearful band following Jesus to Jerusalem, the confident assertion that they can share Jesus' suffering must strike the reader as naive. However, Jesus predicts that they will share his suffering (v. 39), and, indeed, Acts 12:2 informs us that James was martyred in Jerusalem by Herod Agrippa (44 CE; Gal 2:9 suggests that John survived his brother). Jesus' prophetic word was fulfilled.

Jesus' prophecy concerning the martyrdom of James and John reminds us that the failures of the disciples during Jesus' lifetime are not the final word about their faithfulness as followers of Jesus. Although they will run away during the passion, these same disciples will later share the suffering of Jesus.

In addition to a life of service, discipleship also entails walking the journey of witness to Christ – the Christ crucified and the Risen Christ in Glory. In the Gospel according to Mark, it is this journey to foot of the cross that is the pathway to see the full glory of Jesus – in obedience unto death for the redemption of the world.

Of course, the action of asking the questions initiates a human response from the other disciples and a teaching moment from Jesus: "⁴¹ *When the ten heard this, they became indignant at James and John.*⁴² *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.*⁴³ *But it shall not be so among you.*"

The Others Disciples

The reaction of the ten other disciples reveals how easily the human condition is derailed from the "Way." I have always wondered if some among the ten are on the cusp of a "breakthrough" and are about to connect all the dots from Jesus' ministry to his Passion and death, his Resurrection, and return to Glory.... And then they are pulled aside by James and John's appeal to Jesus. In that brief moment they become concerned that the brothers will have advantage, that Jesus might grant their request (thus somehow diminishing them), and the specter of jealousy washes aside their breakthrough. And apart from the Twelve, there must have been the pangs of loneliness felt by Jesus knowing he would stand alone in the darkest of the hours to come. Nonetheless, he calls them together to teach them about the nature of the kingdom.

Jesus notes that: "*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.” The expression “lord it over” is an interesting one. We know that the disciples refer to Jesus as “Lord” (*kyrios*); the actual expression here is “*katakyrieuo*.” It is the prefix “*kata*” (“over” or “down upon”) that moves the expression into the realm of, not just power, but overpower. The same is at play with the word used for “authority.” The root is *katexousiazo* composed of “over” (*kat*) and *exousia* = “power,” “right,” “authority.” Jesus taught as one having authority (*exousia*; Mk 1:22). It is the *kat*- prefix that turns it into a power over people. The underlying word play suggests that Jesus is *Kyrios* and has *exousia*, but they are proposed to the people. The *kat*- prefix implies that there is imposition upon the people.

This will not be the way of the Kingdom.

In these short verses, which in many ways parallels 9:35 (“*If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.*”), there is one difference that Stoffregen notes. In v.44 he/she will be a servant [*diakonos*] of you (plural, indicating the Twelve), while v.45 is he/she will be a slave [*doulos*] of all. This is not a distinction that Matthew makes in his parallel (Mt 20:26-27).

Stoffregen wonders if Mark is making the point that our service and discipleship is not limited to the group, but is pointedly service to the whole world, to all. Is the change from *diakonos* to *doulos* Mark’s way of placing a greater emphasis on serving all people and not just those within the believing community. Juel [*Mark*, 149] has this comment about the passage: “While Jesus’ first comments about discipleship suggest that followers must be prepared to take up their crosses and follow even all the way to death, that does not seem to be the issue here. The question is not willingness to die but rather willingness to lead without flaunting authority. The whole passage has to do with status and leadership -- hardly of interest or concern to a community of desperate, persecuted believers. Such comments would be of interest to a community that has tasted power and likes it, a community that is already experiencing the pressures of institutionalization.”

⁴⁵ *For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.*”

The word for ransom (*lytron*) occurs only here and the Mt parallel. It refers to the price paid to free a slave. Related words are frequently translated as “redemption” or “redeemer”. The reply to James and John highlights the archetypal character of the death of Jesus. The final saying points once again to the Son of Man as the one who has come to serve—not the glory the disciples had in mind. It also states the reason for Jesus’ death: “*a ransom for many*” (v. 45). This formulation distinguishes Jesus’ death from those of martyr disciples, like James and John. The disciple shares Jesus’ suffering but does not offer his or her own life as a sacrifice for the sins of others.

“This final section parallels the opening exhortation to bear one’s cross in imitation of the Son of Man, who came to serve (8:34–38). The self-denial associated with the cross does not always mean martyrdom, even in Mark. Another form of self-denial has been emphasized throughout these chapters: denying the human demand for honor, power, and status. The repeated struggles for honor among the disciples show what a difficult task that reversal of values is. The image of ransom as liberation from slavery opens up an additional dimension of Jesus’ self-sacrifice. It is the true meaning of the victory over evil, which has been enacted in Jesus’ healings and exorcisms.” [Perkins, 654]

Notes

Mark 10:32 on the way. Jerusalem as the destination of the journey is made explicit in Mark 10:32. In the Greek, *hodos*, (vv. 17,32) is more literally translated as “the way.” Some who argue that this simpler translation is better suited to the verses as it takes on a figurative meaning of one’s “way of life.” Even more specifically, *hodos* became a title for the believers in Christ, “who belong to the Way” (Acts 9:2; also Acts 18:25, 26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14).

Mark 10:37 right ... left: Mark uses two different words for “left” (*aristeros* in v. 37 and *euonumos* in v. 40). They are synonymous. Matthew uses *euonumos* in both places in the parallel passage (20:21, 23). Mark uses the second word for the bandits at Jesus' right and left at the crucifixion (15:27) as does Matthew (27:38), but Luke uses *aristeros* for the position at the crucifixion (23:33). When there are people at Jesus' right and left in Mark, they are bandits and it is at their crucifixions. Is that the time of Jesus' glory? Are they the ones for whom God has prepared the honor?

Mark 10:38 cup: While the commentary notes the used of “cup” as a symbol of God’s divine wrath, there are also positive uses of the same imagery. For example, the Lord is my chosen portion and my cup (Ps 16:5); my cup overflows (Ps 23:5); and, I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD (Ps 116:13)

Mark 10:45 serve: Although Jesus says in v. 45 that he did not come to be served but to serve, every other time this word [*diakoneo*] is used in Mark it is Jesus who is being served! After the temptation he is served by angels (1:13). After healing Peter's mother-in-law, she serves them (1:31). The women at the crucifixion are described as those who "used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee (15:41).

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