

the Sunday Readings



Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory. (Mark 10 : 37)

29th Sunday Ordinary Time

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*servicing and giving life*¹

introduction

Mark mentions that Jesus and his disciples are, '*on the road*'. Following Jesus means starting '*on the way*'. By using this biblical expression, the evangelist tells us his understanding of discipleship. He is keenly aware of the complexities of becoming a disciple of Jesus. And he doesn't hold back about the deficiencies of faith among the first disciples. It's his opportunity to clarify for us Jesus' proposal to his followers that they must be prepared to surrender their own interests to the interests of others. In other words they are not to seek their own glory.

first reading: Isaiah 53: 10 – 11²

[the suffering servant]

*Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.(10)
Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.(11)*

Addressing the Israelites in exile under the power of the Babylonians, the prophet deals with their hurt and displacement.³ The poetry boldly asserts that home-coming is possible because the LORD has shared *the power for life-giving* with humankind; for example, with Cyrus, the Persian, who had the power to liberate and allow the Israelites to return home,⁴ and now, with the mysterious '*servant*' who is deformed through suffering.⁵

The servant manages the Israelite's hurt and exile, suggesting that suffering is the new vocation for faithful Torah-keepers to embrace and work through.⁶ The servant has *the power for life-giving* for many (v.11b). The exile setting requires self-abandonment so that the inscrutable power of the LORD may work a genuine newness. '*The upright One*' is transformed in weakness, hurt, failure and in the displacement of exile. According to the prophet, the LORD's power is incompatible with versions of life that inhibit, restrict or exploit. The servant may represent an image of the Israelites, who share GOD's power for life-giving. They

1 Cover image: Christ meeting the wife and the sons of Zebedee by Paolo Veronese. (circa 1565)

2 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

3 *Is.chs.*40-55

4 *Cf.Is.*41:2

5 [vv.10-12] Because the Servant fulfilled the divine will by suffering for the sins of others, he will be rewarded by The LORD.

6 [v.11] *See the light*: - *Enjoy happiness*. This line may originally have read, "*He shall drink and eat to the full*" – at the thanksgiving sacrifice at which he shall divide the spoils (cf v.12).

can share the LORD's power, because they are willing to be deformed, destabilised and despised (v.3). Deformation is the cost of GOD's transforming power. That's like saying that life is gained through it's faithful loss.⁷

response: Psalm 33 : 4 – 5, 18 – 20, 22

[the greatness and goodness of God]

*For the word of the LORD is upright
and all his work is done in faithfulness.(4)
He loves righteousness and justice;
the Earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.(5) . . .
Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,(18)
to deliver their soul from death,
and to keep them alive in famine.(19)
Our soul waits for the LORD;
he is our help and shield.(20) . . .
Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us,
even as we hope in you.(22)*

The psalmist praises the LORD as the constant source of the life and reliability of the world. The song moves from hope to hope. The reliability of creation is evidence of the Creator's faithfulness and that moves the speaker beyond fear (v.18) to hope. The qualities of the LORD are the reason for the praise. The qualities mentioned, provide the material for a full confession of faith in the LORD. Israel's praising in a new song (vv.1-3) matches the LORD's new world (vv.4-5).

The speech on the lips of the speaker is apt. Those summoned to praise are, 'righteous and upright' (v.1). That is, they are Torah-keepers and belong properly to GOD's well-ordered world. The LORD's WORD also is upright (vv.4-5). So those who are called are matched with a well-ordered world – and GOD loves righteousness (v.5). The same WORD is used to describe those who praise – and the one to be praised. It is a relation and a world in which no incongruity exists. Everything fits together harmoniously.

The verdict about GOD and about GOD's world, is that it is, 'steadfast' (vv.18-22). This theme looks back to *verse 5* and frames *verses 18-22*. The faithful Israelite's song moves from loyalty to loyalty. And on this basis there's hope. The Israelite's attitude moves well beyond the fear that marks a natural response of the world. Creation through faithful eyes is a reason for hope in the Creator.

The substance of Israelite hope is deliverance from real worldly danger, protection in every dangerous situation, and an ability to trust because they know the name of the LORD. That knowledge is the reason for their safety in every threat and their confidence against every temptation. Because these upright and righteous ones read creation and discern in it's good order the loyalty of the

⁷ Cf Mk.10:32-34 – the power for life-giving given only in times of vulnerability, opens up the future.

LORD, they can live hope-filled lives. Not to be able to 'read' creation is to live hopelessly. Not to know the real name of the Creator, is to be unable to trust.

Trusting is a response to the *steadfastness* or *reliability* of the LORD. It is that perfect match between the upright obedient ones and the WORD of the upright GOD, which the new song celebrates. People are made new, because this certitude of GOD's reliability, overrides every incongruity in which the LORD seems not faithful, and creatures don't trust.

second reading: Hebrews 4 : 14 – 16

[Jesus the great high priest]

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of GOD, let us hold fast to our confession.(14) For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.(15) Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.(16)

The author pictures humanity lined up like hopeful free-loaders at the door of someone who had known hard times and who understood their plight. In this crowd, everyone knows quite well that life comes up short of it's promises, but hope comes from the fact that the outsiders are dealing with one of their own. Jesus is called a great high priest (v.14).⁸ Jesus has been tested in every way, yet without sin (v.15).⁹ The reign of the exalted Jesus and the throne of grace (v.16) refers to the throne of GOD.¹⁰

GOD's WORD spoken through the prophets and then by GOD's Son, makes stringent and inescapable demands on believers (vv.12-13). Such demands may seem excessive, but Jesus' role is transformative. Jesus, who belongs properly to the divine realm, takes on the weak, failing, vulnerable human condition (v.15). In the exercise of Jesus' high priestly function, the GOD of Christian hope is found. Jesus shares human vulnerability, failure (except in sin) and displacement. Like an exiled people, Jesus, the high priest, has been *through-the-mill* – therefore he's the source of confidence for faithful believers *doing GOD's WORD*.

The significance of Jesus' practice is that *the power for life-giving* or *grace* is given, even to those who don't trust in it. The success of Jesus' practise in the face of vulnerability, still depends on the faithfulness of the following generations of disciples, for whom *the real power for life-giving* is still only a

8 [v.14] 'High priest': - used by Philo for *the Logos*; perhaps the author wants to emphasise Jesus' superiority over the Jewish high priest.

9 [v.15] 'has been tested' – shows the author's knowledge of the tradition of Jesus' temptations, not only at the beginning (cf. *Mk.1:13*) but throughout his public life (cf *Lk.22:28*).

10 The similarity of *Hb.4:16* to *Hb.10:19-22* indicates that the author is thinking of our confident access to GOD, made possible by the priestly work of Jesus. Like them we modern disciples don't have to search around for words to describe our neediness, because the One to whom we address our petitions, knows our plight from the inside.

promise. The memory of Jesus' practise enables such people to continue living in hope and faith.

gospel reading: Mark 10 : 35 – 45

[the request from James and John]

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."(35) And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?"(36) And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."(37) But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?"(38) They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptised, you will be baptised; (39) but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."(40) When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.(41) So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognise as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.(42) But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,(43) and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.(44) For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.(45)

Jesus contrasts leadership among the Gentiles with the kind that He envisions. There is a kind of progression in Jesus' teaching about discipleship. Greatness is said to consist in serving the rest, but the height of greatness is reserved for the one who serves the needs of all. Even if we stop being self-serving and reach out to select others, its a long way from there to feel a responsibility beyond that for the way everything is going. Just the stretching, the intense exercise of letting oneself be aware of a wider circle of events and people, can be exhausting.

Continuing his journey to Jerusalem, Jesus again predicts his suffering, death and glory (vv.32-34). Zebedee's sons, James and John, however ask a favour: "Allow us to sit one at Your right hand and the other at Your left in Your glory!" (v.37). James and John, called elsewhere, 'the Sons of Thunder', were among the first of the Twelve to respond to Jesus' invitation to follow him.¹¹ Now they are asking to become Prime Minister and Minister of Finance 'in the kingdom', they believe Jesus will establish in Jerusalem. They see themselves as part of the Sanhedrin of the new Israel. Twelve was the number required for the Sanhedrin council. But Jesus invites them, 'to share in the cup of his suffering, and the baptism

¹¹ Cf. Mk.1:16-20

of his death' (v.38).¹² James and John are asked to follow Jesus to the cross. They say they can – and Jesus said they will indeed share his destiny, but he's not free to grant their request for seats in the reigning of GOD (vv.39-40). Jesus intends to go to the temple in Jerusalem; first to let *the children* (i.e. *the Israelites*) have their fill and then *'the dogs'* (*the non-Israelites*) could eat the scraps left by the children.¹³

James and John intended to benefit from a Zealot messiah's strategy; i.e. *the power* to allot places in *'the change of parliament'* at the temple. Jesus refuses to be a leader of the Zealot masses. Positions of power are not Jesus' to give (v.40b). Jesus replaces the Zealot view of power with true Messianic practice: *"What you have, give to the poor"*.¹⁴ The people who are empowered by this sharing, become the new centre of *'the power for life-giving'* or *'justice'*. When Jesus is killed, those who follow his practise become *the new temple* – or *the new source of life-giving power*. They too will share the cup of suffering and the baptism into death.

The evangelist Mark, aware of the future fate of James and John, including the way they will die, states that places in the reigning of GOD, depend on the story of each individual. Jesus isn't master of these places of honour. Places are not earned or conquered. In GOD's reigning, places are *received*. James and John will continue the practise of Jesus to the point of their martyrdom. After Jesus was murdered, disciples began to see their own practise as Messianic and constituting the new body of Christ, the Christian community.

At that time, the Roman emperor was known as, *"Benefactor of the whole globe of the Earth"*. When the other disciples were indignant about the conversation between Jesus and the two brothers (v.41), Jesus speaks out against the Roman empire and against all kings and all so-called authorities (vv.42-43). The society Jesus works towards is a society in which there will be no such thing as a state authority. To bring such a society about, leaders are necessary at the beginning. But as John the Baptist said about Jesus, *"Someone is coming more powerful than I and I must give way"*. The disciples had been arguing about who was the most important among them and who would have the most power. They didn't know that *the true power for life-giving* was the reversal of every kind of kingdom they had ever known previously. This was revolutionary! Jesus goes on at some length to impress upon the disciples that the exercise of political and

12 [vv.38-40] *'Are you able to drink the cup that I drink . . . that I am baptised?'*: - the metaphor of drinking the cup is used in the New Testament to refer to acceptance of the destiny assigned by the LORD. In Jesus' case, this involves divine judgment on sin that Jesus, the innocent one, is to expiate on behalf of the guilty (Mk.14:24; Is.53:5). His baptism is to be his crucifixion and death for the salvation of the human race; (cf Lk.12:50). The request of James and John for a share in the glory (Mk.10:35-37) must of necessity involve a share in Jesus' sufferings, the endurance of tribulation and suffering for the gospel (Mk.10:39). The authority of assigning places of honour in the kingdom is reserved to GOD (Mk.10:40).

13 Mk.7:26

14 Mk.10:21

economic power is not his way, nor the way of those who follow him. Instead they must serve one another (v.43). Rather than have an hierarchical base, the new social power will be co-operative, with the one who is slave or servant of all, being the first or highest (v.45).¹⁵

for sharing:¹⁶

- *The 'suffering servant'. Comment on Isaiah 53 : 10 – 11*
- *Jesus the great high priest. Comment on Hebrews 4 : 14 – 16*
- *The request from James and John. Comment on Mark 10 : 35 – 45*

prayer:¹⁷

*Most glorious GOD,
in Jesus you show us
that your will is to save.
Grant to us your people
the boldness to desire
a place in your kingdom,
the courage to drink
the cup of suffering,
and the grace to find in service
the glory you promise.
We ask this through
our LORD Jesus Christ, your Son,*

15 [vv.42-45] Whatever authority is to be exercised by the disciples must, like that of Jesus, be rendered as service to others (Mk.10:45) rather than for personal aggrandisement (Mk.10:42-44). The service of Jesus is his passion and death for the sins of the human race (Mk.10:45); cf Mk.14:24; Is.53:11-12; Mt.26:28; Lk.22:19-20.

16 **Lectio Divina:** reading GOD's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us through reflection. The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet place, a passage of Scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. We suggest using all or part of the gospel readings of the upcoming Sunday. We let the Holy Spirit lead us to understand the words and allow our heart to speak to GOD in words inspired by the Scripture passage, or by the thoughts that have come to us while reflecting on it. Then we let go of ideas and words and allow ourselves to rest in the presence of GOD in simple and wordless contemplation. (See paragraph 153 The Joy of the Gospel – Pope Francis).

There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: **lectio (reading)** – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. **meditatio (reflection)** – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in God's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. **oratio (prayer)** – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. **contemplatio (rest)** – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation. This commentary gives the context on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'.

17 **The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day.** These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

*who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
GOD for ever and ever. Amen.*

the review:¹⁸

When Jesus took bread and wine at the final supper with the disciples and said, "Go on doing this in memory of Me", it was so we would repeat this service for the cause of the poor – that's giving life. "This is My Body" was the same as saying "this is My Life" and it was the same with the Blood. Jesus adds, "My Blood shed" – that is what Jesus wanted us to repeat – not a ritual. The prophets had announced that a new pact would be established between GOD and GOD's people. Pacts in ancient times were sealed with blood. The first pact was sealed with the blood of the paschal lamb. Jesus at the supper says that his blood that he is going to shed is the blood of the new pact! It is in this sense that Jesus' death is life-giving ransom for many (v.45).

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18 **the review:** – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the Word and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.