

MARK 10

Jesus' saying about renunciation

The disciples feel a sudden contrast between their own response to Jesus and that of the rich young man who has just left. They, unlike him, have *left everything to follow* Jesus. The departure of the disciples is carefully shielded from irresponsibility: they have left brothers and sisters, mother and father- which is all okay - and there is no mention of their leaving their wives (Jesus has just taught the indissolubility of marriage) and the children are grown up (*tekna* rather than *paidia*, "little children"). Property figures in the list at the beginning - house - and the end - land. The disciples will be repaid *in this life* with all these things - and people; Jesus himself has said that those he teaches are his brothers and sisters and mother, and the disciples are already enjoying hospitality on their way, despite their being technically homeless. Notice that they are not to number a new father among their relationships within the church: in ch. 11 we shall hear that they have only one Father. At the end of their inheritance comes "eternal life" - that which the rich man had asked how to inherit.

Third Prediction of the Passion

This includes a symbolic posing of the group: Jesus leads at a small distance, while the fatefulness of this journey to Jerusalem is beginning to dawn on those who accompany him. He gives formal expression to their fears by making his third, and most detailed, prediction of the Passion: the details have clearly been filled in by the early Church. Note that the Cross itself is not mentioned in any of the three Marcan predictions. Matthew includes the Cross in the third alone, and in his three predictions John uses the ominous phrase "raised up" for the fate of the Son of Man. Otherwise the Cross is never mentioned as such in any of the predictions.

The Sons of Zebedee

James and John - not their mother, as in Matthew - come to ask for a place at the right and the left of Jesus in his glory. When Jesus says: *You do not know what you are asking* we immediately detect - with our trained ear - an opening out of the situation, and usually this ignorance will involve the ultimacy of the Cross. We see exactly this in the account of the Last Supper in John: Peter is refusing to have his Master wash his feet, and Jesus says to him: *At this time you do not understand what I am doing. Later you will understand.* The word *later* bears an ominous interpretation; and so here. The use of the words *cup* and *baptism* point us towards the Passion; in the Agony Jesus will once more refer to the oncoming suffering as a cup, and this will be reiterated in John at his arrest; the word baptism, which carries a meaning of drowning, is also used in Luke 12:50 to refer to the Passion. So Jesus appears here as already equating his *glory* with his *death*, so that when the two disciples ask to share in his glory, he takes no time to reach the imagery of the Cross. There is no such awareness in James and John. Remember that the first prediction of the Passion is followed by the disastrous intervention of Peter; the second, by the disciples starting a discussion about which of them was the greatest. It is in the same spirit that the two boys make their request. This

is couched in strange form. The Greek says: *Master, we wish that whatever we ask of you, you will do for us.* This is a pretty broad request for a blank cheque. The word “want” has been prominent in the context already: in 9:35 Jesus warned them: *If anyone wants to be first he must make himself last of all and servant of all.* Perhaps because of this warning, the boys do not say in advance what it is they want. Jesus refuses to agree, and asks them to state their desire. The request when it comes displays their having interpreted the glory of Jesus announced in 8:38 (a description of the last judgment), and their understanding of him as Son of Man, who is given glory in the book of Daniel, and the fact that they have seen him transfigured; but it also displays their total misunderstanding of the three predictions of the Passion; they have not understood the necessity that, to be his followers, they need to take up their crosses and come with him. The crosses will be carried by two equally ignorant thieves instead. The phrase “one on your right, the other on your left” points up the ignorance of the two disciples. Jesus responds to their claim that they can accept his future for themselves by promising that they will share cup and baptism, but refusing them their request overall, on the grounds that the Father has already allotted them.

Leadership with service

The Lord now gives them the proper interpretation of what has happened. “You know...” contrasts with the earlier statement “You do not know...”. In spite of the fact that they know about the vainglory of society, they do not understand that it must have no influence among them. The words of Jesus establish the principle that they must actively seek littleness, to come after others, to be slaves to each other. He himself will lead the way, and if the leader takes that path, it will be vital for the followers as well. Notice the echo of the Suffering Servant theme in Isaiah 53 in what Jesus says of himself. Cf Romans 4:25; but less deeply Acts 8:32f (the pattern of humiliation/exaltation) and 1P2:24 (Jesus’ suffering as an *example*). Luke 22:26 - where *servicing* is rightly seen in the context of *waiting at table* - echoes something of the theme touched on in Jn 13, where the deepest vein of redemptive suffering is tapped.

We should consider together these three stories of the Gospel tradition which represent Jesus as a servant or a model of service. The table-waiting image in Luke is a simple one; but the Johannine story is far from simple. Let us read through it now, and understand its structure.

The first thing to notice is that this is a composite text. We can tell this in several ways. Firstly, there are too many introductory forms here: verse one is paralleled in verse 3ab. There is also a contradiction in the story. In verse 7 Peter is told that he does not understand, but later he will understand. In verse 13 Jesus asks them all whether they have (successfully) understood, a question expecting the answer “Yes”. Jesus goes on to propose a perfectly simple and comprehensible answer: he has been giving them an example that they must follow. If that is all that it meant, where is the problem for Peter, or for any of us?

Scholars propose that two different versions of the story are being told together in this passage. One sees the foot washing as a simple moral lesson encouraging the disciples to be humble and serve one another. The other sees the deepest possible meaning in the ritual, with echoes of the Sacraments and of the meaning of the Passion itself. You can separate them out as follows:

Before the festival of the Passover Jesus, knowing that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father, having loved those who were his own in the world, loved them to the end. They were at supper, and the devil had already put it into the mind of Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray him. Jesus got up from table, removed his outer garments and, taking a towel, wrapped it round his waist; he then poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel that he was wearing. When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments again, he returned to the table. *Do you understand, he said, what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord, and rightly; so I am. If I then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you must wash each others' feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you. Now that you know this, blessed are you if you behave accordingly. I am not speaking about all of you; I know the ones I have chosen; but what Scripture says must be fulfilled: He who shares my table takes advantage of me. I tell you this now before it happens, so that when it does happen, you may believe that I am He.*

Now for the second account, with its mysterious depth of meaning.

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was returning to God, and he got up from table, removed his outer garments and, taking a towel, wrapped it round his waist; he then poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel he was wearing. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him: *Lord, are you going to wash my feet?* Jesus answered: *At the moment you do not understand what I am doing; but later you will understand. Never, said Peter, you will never wash my feet.* Jesus replied: *Unless I wash you, you can have no inheritance with me.* Simon Peter said: *Well then, Lord, not only my feet, but my hands and my head as well!* Jesus said: *No-one who has had a bath needs washing; such a person is clean all over. You too are clean, though not all of you are.* He knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said: *Though not all of you are.* Having said this, Jesus was deeply disturbed and declared: *In all truth I tell you, one of you is going to betray me.* The disciples looked at each other, wondering whom he meant. The disciple Jesus loved was reclining next to Jesus; Simon Peter signed to him and said: *Ask who it is he means.* So leaning back close to Jesus' chest he said: *Who is it, Lord?* Jesus answered, *It is the one to whom I give the piece of bread that I dip in the dish.* And when he had dipped the piece of bread he gave it

to Judas, son of Simon Iscariot. At that instant, after Judas had taken the bread, Satan entered him. Jesus then said, *What you are going to do, do quickly.* None of the others at the table understood why he said this. Since Judas had charge of the common fund, some of them thought Jesus was telling him *Buy what we need for the Festival,* or telling him to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the piece of bread, he went out. Night had fallen.