

“CAN YOU DRINK THE CUP?”

Isaiah 53:1-6; March 10:35-45

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Driving through a storm one night, a man's car is hit by lightning. He's shaken by the experience, naturally, and when he gets home, he starts telling his teenage son about what happened, expecting at least a little bit of sympathy. But before he can finish, his son says, "Dad, let's go buy a lottery ticket! They say the chances of being hit by lightning are like the chances of winning the lottery!"

The fantasy of instant riches caused this son to miss both the point and the emotional import of his father's words.

That's so very much what's going on with James and John in this conversation with Jesus. Hanging out with Jesus as the crowds flock to see and hear him has led them to some fantasies about their own future. And thus they are too self-absorbed to really take in the things Jesus has been saying, which have to do with the suffering and death he anticipates.

"Promise you'll do whatever we ask you to do for us," they say.

Jesus, very reasonably, responds "What do you want me to do for you?"

Does that sound familiar? It should. Yes, you heard exactly those words in the story Jerry read and talked about last Sunday. That story actually follows this one, and is meant as a response or counterpoint to it. In that story, Bartimaeus, who is blind, says that he wants to see ... and though he's not one of Jesus' closest followers, his approach to Jesus demonstrates an understanding of who Jesus is. His story is about both physical and spiritual healing, and his faith implies *insight* along with the *eyesight* he regains.

It provides quite a contrast to John and James, whose response to Jesus' question is "We want to be your top guys. We want the best seats, the biggest influence, the most prestige."

Bartimaeus is a rebuke to James and John, and to all "insiders" who ought to see what Jesus is about but fail to do so, those whose visions of personal gain or advancement blind them to the truth of the gospel.

Why didn't James and John understand Jesus better than they did? How could they have been oblivious not just to his teaching but to the sobering things he tells them about suffering and dying.

Maybe they just can't believe that will really happen. Maybe it's denial rooted in fear. Maybe they're just blinded by their ambition.

Jesus responds with another question, the question that is our focus today:

"Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

Can you drink the cup?

We know that Jesus is talking about suffering.

He'll use that same metaphor in anguished prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night just before he's arrested and crucified.

The cup is sometimes a symbol of joy and celebration and gratitude, as in "my cup runneth over." But a cup can also contain a bitter drink, a poison even, so it can be something no one would want to drink. This metaphorical cup stands for suffering and for blood – and life – poured out in self-sacrifice.

"Can you drink *that* cup?" he asks them.

He asks us.

There is only one possible answer to that question.

No.

No, they cannot. No, I cannot. We cannot.

Now, many people do suffer, of course. We know it. We've seen it. We've been there, maybe. And sometimes people do sacrifice and suffer willingly – to achieve something they want, or to advance a purpose that means something to them, or to defend loved ones, or their country, or innocent, vulnerable people.

But sacrifice, suffering and death for the sake of people who don't deserve it?

Taking on all the destructive forces of coercive power, all the hate and violence and evil humanity is capable of, while holding love and compassion intact and undiminished?

And all for the sake of people who don't understand what's at stake? For those who make it or let it happen? For people who won't be grateful?

All out of love, for no reason except love?

No.

James and John are still not listening, though.
“Sure,” they say. “Bring it on.”

But we know they don’t know what they’re saying.

No, we cannot do this.

But this is what Jesus does:

And this is why we honor and reverence him.

This is why he is our Lord and our Savior, and not just our friend and brother.

This is why we hold the cross as our most holy and cherished and powerful symbol.

The cross’s beauty is that it represents that love to us. But claiming it, we have to claim the suffering of it too, or we are as guilty as John and James of claiming to follow Jesus while ignoring the bits we don’t like.

We know we do this. We don’t like the suffering part of Jesus’ story. We don’t like what it shows us of human nature. We don’t like the notion that sin has to be reckoned with somehow. We don’t like the ugliness of it. Few people attend Good Friday services and we don’t read or tell the crucifixion stories often. We tend to avoid hymns with blood imagery – although as Jason has pointed out to me, you can almost always replace the word “blood” with the word “love” and the lyrics will work fine, which is not surprising when you think about it.

But Christianity isn’t just reserving a spot alongside Jesus in this life or the next. Baptism involves taking up the cross and following Jesus. We can make no claim to be able to do what Jesus did, to love and to give of ourselves fully and freely, to be on the receiving end of evil and return only love. But being his people involves us somehow in his path, his way, his priorities, his work in the world.

And that engages us with the suffering of others and opens us to inevitable suffering as we resist what theologian Walter Wink calls “the domination system.” The way of our world is “power exercised over others, by control of others, by ranking..., by hierarchies of domination and submission, winners and losers, insiders and outsiders, [the] honored and the shamed.” (Campbell, p. 197). The church, we who call ourselves Jesus’ disciples, are called to embody an alternative way. We are called to resist the domination system and to care for its victims. We are called to sacrifice, to love, to pour ourselves out, to be like Jesus.

That’s why, I guess, when it comes right down to it, we find it so difficult and uncomfortable to focus on Jesus’ suffering and death. It’s not just that it’s gory and violent; let’s face it, most of us accept gore and violence in our movies, shows, books and news. No, it’s that Jesus’ suffering leads us in a way we don’t want to go. If that’s his way, it has to be our way too, if we belong to him. Maybe that’s why James and John just wouldn’t – or couldn’t – let themselves take in what Jesus was saying. Maybe

that's why they, like so many after them, were eager to see Jesus as someone who dispenses favors of power and prosperity.

But Jesus tells them: that's not what I have to give you.

What Jesus offers instead is the paradoxical way of the cross, a journey in which the great ones are not the tyrants but the servants, not those at the front of the line but those bringing up the rear, not the powerful but the loving, not the comfortable but those who suffer, not the rich but those who give all they have, not those who protect themselves but those who lay down their lives.

This is still the way. It's still hard to choose it.

This passage from Mark's gospel makes me think of the prayer of St. Francis. I think Francis must have reflected deeply on Jesus' question, "Can you drink the cup?" And he understood that the answer had to be, "No. Help me." For anyone seeking to follow Jesus' way of the cross, a prayer like St. Francis' prayer must be a daily necessity:

Grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console,
To be understood as to understand,
To be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.

Resources:

Articles by James J. Thompson, David S. Howell, and Charles L. Campbell in *Feasting on the Word, Year B*, volume 4.