

### **The Road to Greatness**

*6th Sunday after Trinity (Octave of the Feast of St. James, the Apostle [July 25])*

(From the Gospel of St. James the Apostle: St. Matthew xx. 20 ff.)

**20** Then came to him the mother of Zebedee's children with her sons, worshipping him, and desiring a certain thing of him. **21** And he said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto him, Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom. **22** But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto him, We are able. **23** And he saith unto them, Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with: but to sit on my right hand, and on my left, is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father. **24** And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren. **25** But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. **26** But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; **27** And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: **28** Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Our Gospel from the Feast of St. James the Apostle is located at a pivotal point in the account of Jesus' ministry. The verses that just precede today's Gospel in Scripture are these:

**17** And Jesus going up to Jerusalem took the twelve disciples apart in the way, and said unto them, **18** Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, **19** And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and the third day he shall rise again.

The Lord has been injecting this note of warning into His personal time with the Twelve with ever increasing frequency. Within short order, they will triumphantly enter Jerusalem for the climactic final week of His three year career that will culminate in His redemptive work on behalf of all mankind.

This intrusion of *the mother of Zebedee's children* into the course of events with her request seems utterly inappropriate to the circumstance. The very most serious phase of Christ's ministry is about to be entered in upon, and here comes this strange, absurd, almost comical aside arising out of the self-centered concerns of a mother and her two sons (take note that the parallel account of this incident found in Mark 10:35 ff. implicates not the mother, but the two sons, James, and John, themselves). There could not have been a greater *faux pas* committed, one might easily say: to trouble the Savior, who *when the time was come that he should be received up*, [had] *stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem* to suffer and die. But how human it is that such a request should have been made! And how gracious is Jesus to use what really was callous disregard from those who should have set personal gain aside, especially at this moment, and to use their foolishness to offer them yet more necessary instruction. What can we draw from this story for our own use?

The implications of the tale are different depending upon whether we credit the mother for initiating the impulse to approach Jesus, or the sons. If it is the mother, we can imagine her doing what any proud mother might do: trying to promote her children to high levels of office. She feels they deserve it. She also has in mind perhaps the glory that such an assignment would bring the family name. If it is the sons, then we might say that their ambitions are peculiarly masculine. Men by nature gravitate to positions of power and authority. Loathe to admit it, perhaps, they enjoy being in a position of telling others what to do. To be the prime minister or the vice president, even if one can't be the president, will certainly suffice. To be looked up to, well thought of, praised, and relied upon, are chief motivators in the lives of most men.

These two disciples are about to learn that they are laboring under a gross misunderstanding, however. The approach to Jerusalem, and the sense of a gathering climax, had caused them to jump the gun, to misfire, to greatly presume. Assuming that they were near to graduating from their three year stint in Christ's college, they expected an instant high-level job assignment. And since the Lord for inexplicable reasons hadn't already anticipated the occasion by handing out professional appointments well in advance, they decided to take the matter into their own hands.

*Ye know not what ye ask*, replies Jesus with tenderness yet firmness. "You thought that you were already qualified to attain to such a position. You assumed that your proximity to Me these last few years has automatically qualified you to be at the top. You imagine that this worldwide government that I will inaugurate, the Kingdom of God, will be run like any other autocracy, with yourselves firmly in control!" He then asks them two questions that they answer much too hastily. Jesus is asking, "Are you *really* qualified for what you desire? *Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?* Before I even assume the throne promised to Me by My Father, I must both *drink a cup and be baptized.*" These are the cup of suffering that will lead to the baptism of death. Words are cheap, and only attain value by the actions arising from them. James and John had no idea what they were affirming. They were simply in a hot hurry to immediately be elevated to notable, visible positions of glory.

*Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with: but to sit on my right hand, and on my left, is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father.*

Jesus now spoke to James and John prophetically, but the two disciples surely would not have understood His words until the very season when His predictions came true. The manner in which they would come to understand is of special significance to us, because they are very specifically and uniquely recorded in Scripture. For St. James, the fulfillment would occur first before all of his fellow apostles, for in Acts 12 we read:

*Now about that time (early 40's A.D.) Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword. (Acts 12:1, 2)* He led the way in suffering and dying for His allegiance to Christ and the Church, a destiny shared, as tradition informs us, by many of the apostles. His brother St. John, who received the great Revelation of Jesus Christ, suffered Roman banishment and imprisonment for his faith upon the deserted island of Patmos, many years later. Surely Christ's words on that fateful day, now only a memory, when they had so rashly approached him with their untimely request must have returned to their minds as their own further experience of suffering for the sake of the Gospel developed so obviously and tangibly: *Ye know not what ye ask!*

When the other disciples learned of this bit of underhanded treachery from the two in seeking favors from Christ without consulting them, *they were moved with indignation against the two brethren.* This expression in its original language is not a mild one. They were "pained, grieved, greatly afflicted". Were they concerned for the honor and sensitivities of their Master, or were they very upset because an effort to preempt their own ambitions and hopes had been made? We do not know, but the row was great enough that order had to be restored, and a very lasting lesson impressed upon their hearts: *Jesus called them unto him.* He then compared the manner in which men rule, with that which characterizes the Kingdom of God. Though men (and males in particular) exult in the pure pleasure of exercising authority, make the most of it, use it against others, command and expect respect, and consider the attainment of such powers to be a chief goal in life, the followers of Christ will absolutely not be permitted such a luxury. They will attain to leadership through humbling themselves before others, through the risky business of lifting others to a higher level of regard than themselves, through standing in the job line not for positions of management and authority, but for the lowly occupations of servanthood.

As with so many Kingdom concepts, this is completely counterintuitive! If I do not move immediately to advance my own ends, someone else will grab the place I foolishly gave up. Besides, what if the promotion I am expecting to be the result of my self-abasement is delayed for a long, long time, and I find myself remaining in the place of humble service with no apparent likelihood of change? But it is just here where we learn exactly what we so rashly vowed when we said to Jesus: *We are able.* "We can drink the cup and endure the baptism You require". *Ye shall drink indeed and be baptized* replies the Lord, but when the process is complete, and only then, will you be fit to lead, govern, *be great,* and *be chief.*

We might call the school that prepares us for such a calling "Life", but it is not merely life, otherwise every life lived anywhere on earth for any reason would yield the same result. No. It is a life lived --*only lived*-- for Christ. Without His tutelage, those lessons which life offers would offer no training toward any higher responsibility. With no guiding and gracious Hand

causing *all things to work together for the good* (Romans 8:28), there would be no hope of fulfilling that calling which has been laid upon *all* of us, not merely the Twelve:

*Thou...hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.* (from Rev. 5:9, 10)

Yes, we have all been called to share that destiny which James and John so earnestly desired: *we shall reign.*

As Jesus said to them at this very critical moment, *to sit on my right hand, and on my left, is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father.* Who will occupy such an honored post? One might respond: "Look for the humblest saint in all of history!" But chances are, if he or she is among the humblest, their service to God will be invisible, known not to men, but to God alone. But we can say with certainty that the only distinguishing characteristic that would be readily apparent in them would be the extent to which they had *ministered* and *served*.

To rule and to reign with Christ is the greatest of ambitions, but one whose attainment --in that same paradoxical manner that always distinguishes the ways of men from the ways of God's Kingdom-- is guaranteed only by the setting aside of the wrong kind of ambition.

I think this is a life's goal well worth pursuing.

Do you?

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*