

A Cup and a Baptism

Saint James the Elder, Apostle (25 July 2010)
Saint Mark 10:35-45

Dearly beloved, in today's Holy Gospel, we meet a pair of brothers—James and John. These sons of Zebedee, once fishermen, had been called by Jesus to forsake everything and follow Him. This they did. Whatever else can be said of these **“sons of thunder”** (Mk 3:17), a title given to them by Jesus, James and John were very attentive students. When Jesus preached, these brothers were not just sitting in the pews thinking about the afternoon baseball game or what to throw on the grill for dinner. They listened to His every word. They took to heart what He said. Why, they even put Jesus' word into practice. **“Ask, and it will be given to you”** (Mt 7:7), Jesus proclaimed in His sermon on the mount. So here these brothers are, standing in front of Jesus, asking, with the full expectation that He will grant their request. **“Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You. ... Grant us to sit, one at Your right hand and one at Your left, in Your glory.”**

Talk about boldness and ambition. These two brothers have their eyes set at the very top. Since Jesus told them to ask confidently, believing that He is the Giver of all good gifts, here they are, asking, confident that Jesus will grant their request.

I know what you're thinking. How dare they? Who do they think they are? These guys are presumptuous, conceited, greedy. If those thoughts are running through your mind, you're not alone. For that is exactly what the other ten disciples were thinking. When they heard James and John's request, they began to be indignant. Why? Because they saw James and John asking for the very thing they too had been coveting, but hadn't yet found a way to ask for it.

But Jesus does not rebuke them for their request. After all, He wants them to hold Him to His word. He wants them to ask Him confidently. He wants them to see Him as the Giver of every good gift. So instead of a rebuke, Jesus responds by pointing them to Himself: **“You do not know what you are asking. ... The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, 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.”**

Then, Jesus calls the Twelve together and says to them: **“You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”**

With these words, our Lord teaches James and John, the other ten, and you and me that He is not about power or lordship. Ironically, power and lordship are inherently His, for the Father has given Him **“all authority in heaven and on earth”** (Mt 28:18). And yet, Jesus exercises that authority by becoming a servant, by being a slave of all, by giving His life as a ransom for many.

You know the story. Christ delivered man from the guilt and power of sin by becoming man, leading an obedient life, and then suffering and dying on your behalf. Through this, the greatest act of love, God rendered His service to you by freeing you from the pangs of sin, death, and hell. Jesus’ service to you was that He became your substitute. God’s wrath against your sin was poured out on Christ instead of you. And because of this service on the cross, He who is the Resurrection and Life now intercedes for you before our Father!

Can you think of a greater love? As a sinner, you deserve nothing of God’s grace and mercy. And yet, through the service of His Son, Jesus Christ, the Father loves you and claims you as His own. What other motivation do you need to serve those around you, even if they don’t seem deserving. After all, you are no more deserving of Jesus’ service to you than your fellow man is of your service to him. So, to instill this perfect love in you, our Lord Jesus Christ continues to come to you here in His house and serve you through Word and Sacrament. His service to you didn’t end on the cross. On the contrary, He has promised to be with you in good times and bad, in sickness and in health.

As for James and John, they did not fully know what they were asking, but they were on the right track. For they would drink the cup Jesus drank and be baptized with the baptism Jesus underwent on the cross.

Of all the Apostles, James drank of this cup first. He was the first of the Twelve to taste the chalice of martyrdom, to praise God with his life, to be baptized with the bloody baptism of the crucified Christ. In the Year of Our Lord 44, James was killed by the sword of King Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of the same Herod who tried to kill Jesus in His infancy. And with that, James’ prayer to Jesus was

answered. James wanted glory. He got it. But in a far different manner than he ever could have imagined.

Today we remember and thank God for Saint James the Elder. We honor his service to Christ's Church by dressing our altar in red, the color of martyrdom and blood. Whatever his sins and weaknesses were (and he certainly had them), James repented and believed in Christ. He died daily to sin and rose in the newness of life that comes only through Christ's word of forgiveness. He preached Christ and proclaimed the foolishness of the cross. He exercised his apostolic authority not by power or lordship, but by becoming a servant. By confessing Christ. By living from every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. By partaking of Christ's life-giving body and blood often. By rebuking false doctrine. By proclaiming the truth of God's Word. And last but not least, like a lamb among wolves, James did not love his life to the very death.

Learn from Saint James. Stop seeking the place of honor. Stop stepping on others to get ahead in life. Stop idolizing power and lordship. Instead, learn from James to forsake all and follow Christ. Learn from James to ask big things of Christ and to be content with Christ's answer. Learn from James to drink the cup Christ gives you to drink and to bear the cross Christ gives you to bear. Learn from James not to lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, but treasures in heaven. Learn from James to be a servant to all and to give your life as a testimony to Him who gave His life as a ransom for many. Learn from James to be crucified with Christ so that it was no longer you who live but Christ who lives in you.

So, were James and John given the seats of honor they desired? We are never told. That is the Father's business, says Jesus. Yet, we do know that James' desire to be with Christ in Paradise was granted to him by God's grace.

Our Lord has the very same thing in store for you. This very morning Jesus gives you Himself. He gives you a Baptism with which to be baptized. He buries you into His flesh and resurrects you to a new life. He places a cup to your lips and bids you drink of His life-giving blood. He has given His life as a ransom for you, so that you are now His own, a servant to your neighbor and brother and everyone whom He places in your path. I do not know the various ways your life (and perhaps even your death) will glorify your Father, but this I do know: When Christ is ready for you, He will lead you through the valley of the shadow of death to Himself and an unending joy in His presence with Saint James and every other sinner whom He has washed clean in His holy precious blood.

So rejoice. Your name is written in heaven. Like Saint James, you are Christ's!

In the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Jesus Christ unto life everlasting.

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