

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, May 29, 2024
Matthew 20:17-28

HOLY GOSPEL.....Matthew 20:17-28, KJV
Last week we read about the Laborers in the Vineyard. Now we read our Lord's third passion prediction, along with the request of the mother of James and John.

Before the Gospel:

☐ The Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew, the Twentieth Chapter:

☑ **Glory to you, O Lord.**

¹⁷And Jesus going up to Jerusalem took the twelve disciples apart in the way, and said unto them, ¹⁸Behold, 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, ¹⁹And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and the third day he shall rise again.

²⁰Then came to him the mother of Zebedee's children with her sons, worshipping him, and desiring a certain thing of him. ²¹And 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. ²²But 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. ²³And 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. ²⁴And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren. ²⁵But 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. ²⁶But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; ²⁷And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: ²⁸Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

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

Another of the Evangelists – St. Mark – reports that it was James and John themselves who came to Jesus requesting high seats in the Kingdom (Mark 10:35-45). Here, in our reading from St. Matthew, it is their mother who makes the

request. Well, that is a motherly and fatherly kind of thing. We want our children to flourish. But I have chosen the King James Version of our Matthew reading because it makes clear that Jesus cuts to the chase. He does not answer the mother, but directly addresses the sons. In the King James Version, you can tell this because of the old excellent word “ye.” We have a similar expression here in America. They still use it down South. It is the expression “you all.” That is how you signal the plural second person. That is how you signal that you are addressing more than one person. But modern English usage leaves it ambiguous as to whether the speaker is addressing one person or more than one. Modern English simply says “you.” And so the modern Revised Standard Version, for example, gives this response to the mother’s request:

²²But Jesus answered, “*You* do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” (Matthew 20:22, RSV)

“You do not know.” Is Jesus speaking to the mother or to the sons? The old King James Version makes it clear. Jesus addresses the sons:

Ye know not what ye ask. (Matthew 20:22, KJV)

And sure enough, it is the sons who answer. Their bold exchange with Jesus goes this way:

[Jesus said] 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. (Matthew 20:22, KJV)

One way or the other, whether it is the mother who makes the request or the sons themselves, it is an incredible request. Its timing is just plain awful. Jesus has just given his third Passion prediction. He has just spoken of being condemned, mocked, whipped, and crucified. And the Zebedee family comes along and asks about high seats in the kingdom. The juxtaposition of these two ideas is jarring. Jesus is talking about submitting to a sinful world. He is willing to empty himself all the way to death, and these two disciples come along asking for high seats in glory. They just do not get it!

And what about Peter? Are they trying to elbow Peter out? I mean, Jesus had an inner *three* — not an inner *two*. It was not simply James and John who went up the Mount of Transfiguration, but rather Peter, James, and John. And Peter was the main character of the three on that holy mountain. Furthermore, Jesus had said that Peter is “the rock,” and that Jesus would build his church on the faith

like that of Peter. But in this story, James and John seem vainglorious. That is, they seem to be seekers of glory rather than humble followers of Jesus.

So, this evening's text exhorts us toward humbleness of heart. The Bible often praises humility. In Psalm 18, for example, we read this about God:

For thou dost deliver a humble people;
but the haughty eyes thou dost bring down. (Psalm 18:27, RSV)

And in Psalm 138, we read similar words. It is a verse I have always loved:

For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly;
but the haughty he knows from afar. (Psalm 138:6, RSV)

What I said in an earlier sermon about the love of money, I can also say about the love of glory: These loves can be insatiable. No matter how much glory we have, we might find ourselves maneuvering for even more. So it goes with James and John. They are already part of the inner three. Now, they try to arrange things so that they will be the inner two, sitting on the left hand and the right hand of Jesus. I've already mentioned St. Peter. What about St. Paul? He was great too. Maybe he should sit in one of those chairs beside Jesus. And St. Francis is admirable too. We should leave it to God to arrange these things.

May I suggest that the cure for vainglory is renewed commitment to Jesus. Perhaps drawing closer to Jesus will bring us some glory in life. Perhaps not. If we lived in monasteries and convents, I would like to think that renewed commitment to Jesus would bring us some more glory in those spiritual communities. Out there in New York City, I am not quite so sure. But one way or the other, it should help us to set aside the lure of glory to focus on drawing nearer to Jesus. Let our attitude be, "Whether I am big or little, I mean to love Jesus and to walk with him. Whether I become famous or am overlooked my whole life, I mean to walk in his ways. I mean to offer myself, in hope that Jesus will use me for his own good purposes."

What does the Lord require of you, O man, O woman? According to the prophet Micah, what the Lord requires of us is a certain kind of walk in life — a humble walk. Micah's great words go this way:

⁶With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
⁷Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,

with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my first-born for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"
8He has showed you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8, RSV)

So, that is Micah.

Finally be pleased to know this: Drawing nearer to Jesus might not gain us much glory nowadays, but we will not regret it in eternity. Maybe no one on earth will applaud us for a simple life of following Jesus, but then there is heaven to be considered. There is the applause of the angels to be considered. There are the praises of the saints and of mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers in that good land to be considered. And chiefly there is the regard of our Triune God, who, though the He is high, still regards the lowly, and to him belongs the glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.