

Sermon Elbowing the way up Mark 10:35-45

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Do we not all want to move upwards on the ladder of success in life, in our work? We get some important advice from the Gospel story of St Mark today.

We learn both what to do - and also what not to do. What not to do is clearly shown by the actions of the two disciples James and John.

Later in their life, they would be honorable pillars of the Church – but St Mark paints here a very honest picture of how James and John needed considerable time to learn how to live a Christian life. That is encouraging for us. We are all on a journey, and we are not perfect yet; God is patient with us, and we must be patient with each other, and with ourselves.

Elbowing

James and John went to Jesus: 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.'

Yes, we hear that right! They were asking for a blank check!

Imagine, going to your boss, and telling him: 'I want you to do for me whatever I ask of you.' That is, brothers and sisters, not so good for your career.

Jesus ignored their rather dumb introduction. 'Yes, what can I do for you?' They wanted to have the best positions in the coming Messianic Kingdom.

They wanted to be sure that the table seating will be in their best interest, and to sit on the right hand and on the left hand of Jesus at that eternal banquet.

The other disciples were very upset when they found out what James and John had asked. Did they not *all* want the best position at the eternal table?

It would be very easy to now picture James and John as rather unspiritual or insensitive – but let us treat them fairly – and look at the circumstances.

Our Lord and his disciples were walking to Jerusalem, they were actually quite close already, and Jesus had just told them this:

We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. (Mark 10:33-34)

A week later, the Lord Jesus would be crucified, but Jesus did not shy away from his coming end – he knew it had to happen. Mark describes that Jesus was walking ahead of the disciples... who were amazed ... and also afraid.

The great Church Father John Chrysostom speaks with empathy of the 'bewilderment' of the disciples. 'They now believed, now disbelieved, and could not understand Jesus' sayings.' (Homily 65.2, *Gospel of Matthew*)

In that situation of increasing fear of death, the disciples were hopeful as well – Jesus spoke of his resurrection... So their mind was, I imagine, focused on the Jewish end time expectation of the Messianic banquet.

John and James wanted to be sure that following Jesus into all these problems was not for nothing and to be as close as possible to Jesus in the eternal kingdom – an altogether worthy goal.

There was nothing wrong with the desire of James and John to be sure that at the end of the difficult period of suffering, resurrection, and reward, a glorious banquet, being close to Jesus, a crown, would await them.

This is the hope of the Christian faith; and this hope is what helps us continue on, even when life gets tough.

And think of this, James and John were full cousins of Jesus. Would they, as close family members, not have some extra credit with him?

Well, no actually. They were wrong. Their mistake was not that they wanted to be sure to be with Jesus in his coming Kingdom – their mistake was that they wanted the best skybox in the stadium, the most honorable position at the expense of others.

They desired treatment as the most honored guests – at the exclusion of other followers of Jesus. This was pure elbowing for position.

This view of greatness, of success, this way of getting there ... is not strange at all – it is quite common in life, but Jesus is critical about it.

A follower of him should not use the methods that we are so accustomed to around us. After all these years with Jesus it was still not clear to the disciples what Jesus had been teaching and living out.

Drink his cup, receive his baptism

Instead of answering their skybox request with a straight 'no', Jesus asks James and John another question, to show that their request was really out of order.

You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?

The cup and the baptism Jesus speaks about are the cup of his suffering and his baptism into death.

Maybe James and John were thinking of the cup they were looking forward to drinking at the Messianic banquet. Sure, they would be able to drink that cup! No worry!

Or maybe they thought of the cup they knew they would be drinking at the Passover meal a few days later.

'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many', Jesus said. (Mark 14:24) The disciples were convinced they could drink the cup of Jesus. 'Yes, we can'.

They were mistaken; they could never suffer the awful godforsaken death our Lord suffered. Although later, as his apostles, they would, also suffer to a lesser extent - because they proclaimed him in the world.

James would be killed with the sword by king Herod Agrippa, we read in the book of Acts. (Acts 12:2)

And John would have a long life, he became bishop of Ephesus, but we know how he was also suffering for Christ, for instance by his expulsion to the Island of Patmos.

And according to Church Father Tertullian, who lived around the year 200 here in North Africa, John was plunged into boiling oil in the city of Rome.

Jesus did connect the crown that his disciples desired, and the messianic banquet, *with the cross they were to suffer*. The journey to glory goes over the road of suffering and of serving others, is what Jesus suggests

Status in the Kingdom of God is acquired by serving others, not by elbowing. The disciples did not grasp this yet. The best place in the Kingdom is for those who serve and suffer most. Only the way of the cross leads to the crown.

In his lovingkindness, Jesus did not hammer this truth into James and John; He knew that they were soon to learn this truth the hard way. And he also did not refuse their request; he simply told them that it is not for him to divide the chairs.

St John Chrysostom has an interesting comment about this. He says that Jesus could of course have answered their question with yes or no, and the Church Father proves this with a quote from the Gospel of John where Jesus says: 'The Father loves the Son and gave all things into his hands.' (John 3:35)

The reason why Jesus did not answer the question, according to Chrysostom, was that he did not want to create division among his followers and not disappoint any of them.

This is an interesting approach of Chrysostom – and so Middle Eastern. Here in Egypt, in order to not displease you, people can give you the most interesting responses – in order to not have to say no in your face.

True greatness in serving

Jesus then called all Twelve together. He explained to them that in regard to leadership and greatness, his kingdom is not like the kingdoms in the world. In his kingdom, all things are very different.

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.

Jesus is actually speaking with irony about these worldly rulers. He calls them 'so called' rulers, or people who are 'considered' great ones. Jesus is actually saying, that

in the end, those people are not the real rulers. They only seem to be rulers. They are not that great.

And if you think of it – if people measure their importance by the number of personnel, or by how they enforce obedience from their personnel, or by who gets promoted, by the size of their desk, or by the paycheck they get in the end of the month, then they have a rather miserable self-image!

If your self-image is based on all that, who is the ruler? Your circumstances maybe? And if those circumstances change, you have lost your honor, your value?

Do we want your personal value to be based on your power or paycheck? If your answer is yes, well, by all means, use the elbows, make it work. Get to the top. But on the top, you'll never be satisfied. And you'll always be fearful to lose it all again. And surely, you will lose it.

Our Lord Jesus points to a better, a more wholesome view of self and of leadership.

Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

The desire to be a leader is not wrong. There is nothing wrong with aiming at positions of leadership. To aspire to a position of leadership, whether in church, or in work, or in your nation, is a good thing. The desire to lead is a God-given desire.

The real issue is: how do we get there, and how do we behave there.

Leadership is about serving people, is what Jesus says.

In society, the importance of a person is measured to an extent by how many people serve you. In the kingdom of God, the question is really how many *you* serve.

Jesus points at himself as the true criterion for greatness. He became the servant of all people – He even died for all. Servanthood is the normal characteristic of people who follow him, and that, exactly that, makes them fit for leadership.

St John Chrysostom wrote about this:

So you need not be too picky if you suffer the loss of your honor. No matter how much it is lowered, you will not be descending as far as your Lord descended.

Be ready to abase yourself. For in this way your glory is exalted even more, and in this way it becomes greater. This is the door of the Kingdom. [Homily 65.4, *Gospel of Matthew*]

Conclusion

So, concluding: Our honor and our sense of value must not be based on the appearance of power, position, or greatness.

If it is based in being reconciled with God and in following the Lord Jesus Christ, then we are truly free.

That freedom liberates us to serve other people. And it liberates us to living a life that is not driven by the urge to perform, to show off, to boss people around, to get the best seats at the table of success.

This attitude of not walking over people and to actually serve others, is a beautiful trait in people, and rather hard to find.

It is not surprising that it is often recognized, even in our society, as a precious precondition for being promoted to leadership. With no need for using the the elbows.

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