

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

CROSS POLITICS

Mark 10:35-45

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24)

Analysis by Kris Wright

35James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." 36And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" 37And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." 38But Jesus said to them, "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?" 39They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; 40but 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."

41When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. 42So Jesus called them and said to them, "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. 43But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. 45For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Setting the Scene:

Jesus leads a group of fearful followers, including his twelve astonished disciples, up to Jerusalem. For the third time Jesus tells them what to expect: He will be mocked, spit on, beaten, and killed; three days later he will rise. Our pericope is the disciples' response.

DIAGNOSIS: Politics as Usual-Top Down

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Jesus, Do For Us Whatever We Ask*

Not one among them has heard or understood what Jesus has now said for the third time. Having no frame of reference but the top-down politics of the world, the disciples assume that it will be politics as usual but with their party in control. With visions of limos, servants, and prestige filling their heads, James and John petition Jesus for “overlord” positions of power and glory. They are in this enterprise for what Jesus can do for them, and the other ten are upset because the Zebedees got their applications in first. They have no idea what kind of implication their request may have.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *We Are Able*

Although they have been with Jesus, seen his works and heard his teaching, the disciples don't understand much about kingdom life. They believe that wealth and power and success are signs of God's favor. Certainly their political preference is not a system that exalts the lowly or wins by losing or serving or dying. They certainly don't understand the cup of God's wrath, the judgment (Isa. 51:17, 22) that Jesus must drink or the baptism into death he must undergo. “Sure,” they say, “give us the cup. We can take it. We can do whatever it takes.” Their cup, the one they are so ready for is the sweet wine of

success, and their baptism is an anointing into power.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *You Will Drink*

God leaves them in all their glory. Having recognized the “lords” of power and wealth and prestige as their rulers, they are held captive by the tyrants they have chosen. The lords of this world will turn on them. Their cup of sweet wine will become a cup of wrath. When we are attracted to this kind of top-down politics, we unknowingly invite the wrath of God, and he will make us drink the consequences; judgment, destruction, and death. While they don’t know it yet, they will, indeed, drink the cup of wrath and be baptized in the fires of hell. Meanwhile, the seats of power they have so coveted—at Jesus’ right and left—will be occupied by two thieves.

PROGNOSIS: God’s Politics-Bottom Up

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Ransomed*

God’s politics turns everything upside down. Jesus, the Lord who is King and Ruler of all, reigns from a cross, not a royal throne. He is no tyrant, but a salve for all, who gives his life as a ransom for many. In his dying and rising, the cup of wrath becomes a cup of salvation through his blood. He descends even to hell so that we who are baptized into his death are raised to a life like his.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Jesus Enables Us*

Only through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross are followers able to make sense of Mark’s gospel: Jesus, the Servant King inaugurates a new bottom-up politics where the greatest are slaves and losers win. Having been ransomed through Christ, we are freed from the tyranny of striving to do whatever it takes to get to the top.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *We Will Do*

Whatever You Ask, Jesus

Now that we know what we're asking for, the request changes: "Ask not what Jesus can do for you, ask what you can do for Jesus." It is not just a change in leadership but systemic change in the politics of life. It's a whole new kingdom where the position of honor is at the end of the line, a world where we're not in it for what we can get, but for what we can give. The power we receive is the power to serve as Jesus served us – by giving whatever he asks – even our lives for the sake of the gospel.