

Lent 5 / March 21, 2021

Mark 10:43;45

“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant...For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”

How many of you have read any of Shakespeare's plays? I honour Shakespeare in the spirit of Mark Twain, who described classics such as the works of Shakespeare, 'as books that everyone has heard about, but few have read.' I can't say I have read any Shakespeare, but I do know a few lines from "Romeo and Juliette," as well as one from "Hamlet". As he reflected on the meaning of life, the trials and troubles of human existence, Hamlet said, "To be or not to be, that is the question." It's a question everyone asks themselves from time to time, especially when feelings of despondency rise up in the face of the troubles of life. It's an existential question as old as sin. It's a literary question voiced in the bible several millennia before Shakespeare by Job, who wondered why God made humans since life is filled with misery.

If Hamlet had been reflecting on our text and Jesus' ministry rather than on his own existential angst, he might have cried out, 'to serve or to be served, that is the question.' The disciples James and John were not questioning the meaning of their lives. They were not feeling despondent. They were walking on sunshine. They had found great meaning in their association with Jesus. Forget the existential angst, they had hit the existential jackpot. They had been chosen by Jesus to be His disciples. Jesus was the Messiah. He was going to be the new king of Israel. They were going to share in His glory. They wanted as much glory as they could get and so they asked to be His leading men, one on the right and on the other left, when He came into His glory. Were they following Jesus to serve or to be served? That's the question!

That's a question we should ask ourselves. Why do we follow Jesus, to serve or to be served? Actually, it's not an either-or question. It's both! We follow Jesus that we may be served with His grace in forgiveness and so that we may serve others with the same grace which He serves us. We follow Jesus first and foremost, so that He might serve us with redemption from sin and death through the ransom of His cross. In the cross of Jesus, God purchased us, as St. Peter says, "not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with His own precious blood." He redeemed us from the control of sin, from the power of the devil. Through the service Jesus rendered on the cross, God lifts from our heads the condemnation of death and bestows upon us the crown of eternal life. We serve Jesus, other people and one another in response to His service. We serve God as followers of Jesus, but our service is a tiny response in comparison to unfathomable service Jesus rendered to redeem us from our sins and free us from their control, by giving His life as a ransom.

What was going on with James and John? Was it as bad as it sounds? In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "Ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you." Bless their souls, James and John took Jesus' words to heart. If you are going to ask, don't ask for something small, ask for something big. Why look for silver when you can just as easily ask for gold? If you are going to knock on heaven's door, knock long, hard and loud, like the persistent widow in Jesus' parable. When Jesus asks what they want Him to do for them, they say, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." It seems a bit presumptuous. The other disciples were chagrined, but think about it, they are expressing great faith in asking for great things. There is a hymn about prayer that says, "You are coming to a king, large petitions with you bring." If a Billionaire such as Bill Gates or Warren Buffet invited you to ask them for anything out of their wealth, wouldn't it seem insulting to ask for something small and insignificant?

It may sound presumptuous to us as it did to the other disciples, but Jesus doesn't rebuke them for asking to be seated one at His right and the other at His left, when He comes in His glory. He questions their insight. He tells them they don't know what they are asking and what will come to them as a result of their association with Him. He knows they want glory. There will be glory, more than they request or imagine, but first there will be a cross; His cross and their crosses. If you are going to ask, ask big! If you are going to seek, go for the gold. If you are going to knock, knock loud, hard and long, but remember with great blessings comes great responsibilities; and that glory is always preceded by the cross. Jesus is a king, the greatest king. He has a kingdom to bestow upon those who follow Him, but remember Jesus came into His kingdom through the cross. We come into His kingdom through the blood of His cross. We serve in His kingdom under the service He rendered on His cross.

We serve in His kingdom under the cross, not as a penalty, not as part of our salvation, but as a blessing. Even as we are blessed with the Lord's service through the cross, we are blessed to serve the Lord, even if that service involves suffering on our part. Paul wrote in Philippians chapter one, "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ, you should not only believe in Him but also suffer for His sake." Our service does nothing to preserve our relationship with God, or enhance our status in His sight. God honours us by blessing us with the service of His love in the grace of forgiveness, for the sake of Christ. God honours us by blessing us with a role in His plan of salvation, by serving in His kingdom of grace. As Paul said in the letter to the Ephesians. "For by grace you have been saved through faith...For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which He prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." God blesses us with the service of His love for the sake of Christ Jesus. God blesses us to serve in His love for the sake of Christ Jesus, even in the things we suffer.

We may not want to hear about suffering in service of Jesus. James and John certainly weren't thinking of suffering when they requested places at Jesus' right and at His left when He came into His glory. Nevertheless, Jesus came into His glory through the suffering of the cross. They would drink the same cup of suffering, before they received the crown of glory. Not just them, but us and all who Jesus calls to follow Him, must in some way drink of the cup of His suffering. No one likes to suffer and no one should seek suffering and persecution, but when they come to us, we should seek to find Jesus in them and pray that we may glorify God through our suffering.

Again, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil falsely against you on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." When the apostles were beaten for their confession of Jesus by the rulers of the temple, they rejoiced that God counted them worthy to suffer dishonour for the name of Jesus. It's a blessing to serve in the name of Jesus. It's a blessing to suffer hardship for the sake of Jesus and His cross. On the cross Jesus suffered and gave His life as a ransom, so we would have the ultimate suffering of eternal death, lifted from our heads and be given a promised share in His resurrection.

Why do we serve Jesus? When you read the chapters immediately before our gospel, you get the impression that everyone, including the disciples, approached Jesus with their own interests at heart. The Pharisees want permission to divorce their wives for any reason. A rich young man wants to follow, but when Jesus tells him to give his wealth to the poor and follow Him, the young man walks away. Peter laments everything the disciples have given up to follow Jesus and wonders what they will get for their trouble. What did they get for their trouble? They were beaten. They were arrested. They were imprisoned. They were despised. They were falsely accused, and condemned; just like Jesus. All were murdered except for one! Was it worth all that trouble? Absolutely!

It was worth all that trouble and more, because they received something of immeasurable value; peace with God through ransom Jesus paid for their sins and a promised share in His resurrection to everlasting life. Whatever they suffered, whatever they lost, whatever they gave up in this life, was more than compensated by everything they gained through their association with Jesus in time and everything they will receive through Him in eternity. They received this not in return for their service, but as a gift of grace for the service Jesus rendered, by giving His life as a ransom for our sins. So too in our lives! We receive peace with God through the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life, not in return for our service, but as a gift of grace for the service Jesus rendered us, by giving His life as a ransom for our salvation. God in mercy keep us in His grace until the day of Christ Jesus. In His Name. Amen