

Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity
October 21, 2018
Homily for the Anglican Usage Mass
of the
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Mark 10:35-45

It is easy to lose patience with people to whom we must say the same thing over and over again, but from whom we always seem to get the same result. Yet in the example of Jesus we see that we need not lose patience but can instead simply teach the same lesson, using a new approach.

I am speaking, of course, about James and John, who in today's Gospel ask for the privilege of sitting at the right and left hand of Jesus when He comes into His glory. Remember that these two brothers had already seen the glorified Jesus, when they ascended Mount Tabor with him and were witnesses of the Transfiguration. Now they ask to be in the place of Moses and Elijah, whom they saw speaking to Jesus on the mountain. In their new transfiguration, it would be Jesus with James and John on either side instead of Moses and Elijah.

There is so much wrong with their request, and Jesus responds first by asking if they can bear His baptism and drink His chalice. He's talking about His crucifixion that He will suffer in Jerusalem, and James and John assert they are able to do likewise. But we have to question their sincerity in this regard, since they both ran away and left our Lord alone when the time for His passion actually came.

What I think happened here is that the sons of Zebedee mistook responsibility for privilege. Jesus had the brothers in His inner circle, so to speak, an inner circle that also included St. Peter, who had also been on the mountain for the Transfiguration. Rather than seeing their role as one of increased responsibility because of their increased intimacy with the Lord, they saw opportunity to exalt themselves above their fellow disciples, even Peter, who enjoyed the same position in the inner circle. Their ambition was to be in charge, even over him whom Jesus had called the Rock upon whom the Church would be built.

We see this same sort of jockeying for power in most high schools, where the seniors have an increased level of responsibility. Yet too often they use their increased age and level of experience to exalt themselves over their fellow students, especially the underclassmen. Rather than seeing that everyone is fed, they eat the choicest of the food, they jump to the front of the line, they expect the young ones to get out of their way as they walk through the halls. They have a responsibility to be leaders, but they use it for their own advantage. This is James and John, the big men on campus, who are as embarrassing in their arrogance as they are oblivious to how others see them.

And Jesus has been patient with them already. Not only did he walk them down the mountain to show them that the cross comes before the glory. Our Lord also gave them the example of the child after he learned they had been discussing which of the disciples were the greatest. Recall how he told them at the time, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all," even embracing a child to make sure they'd get the point by way of illustration.

John soon showed he hadn't gotten the message at all. He forbade a man from casting out demons in Jesus' name because the man wasn't part of the group John was part of. Again Jesus had to rebuke the

Beloved Disciple, telling him, “He that is not against us is for us.” And still Jesus’ patience was not over. He had more to say before the brothers made their ridiculous request.

When you go home and read your Bibles tonight, look at the passage that immediately precedes our Gospel today. In it you will see that Jesus tells the disciples in explicit terms that their journey to Jerusalem will end with our Lord’s passion, death, and resurrection. He lays it all out for them one more time, that to be one of His followers means to suffer intensely, to be last, not first. Yet their request was the one we heard today.

Jesus must once again teach James and John what their mission is. This time he draws out the contrast between how the Gentile rulers lord their authority over the population, and how disciples of Christ are to be like slaves that wash the feet of the faithful. He tells them that they must model their lives after His, that He has not come to abuse the slaves, but to set them free. “For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Patient to the end, the Lord explained once again that the inside scoop He has given them, the access to the Lord of life, is not to be used as a bludgeon. Their job is to love not to win; and if they want to win, they must learn how to love.

It is encouraging to remember that James and John did finally get it. James became the first of the apostles to be martyred, and John suffered greatly for decades as he communicated to a world of masters this message of sacrificial love that sets the prisoners free. Jesus’ example of patience should give us hope as we find ourselves repeating things we thought our friends and neighbors, our children and our peers, already knew. However obtuse the disciples seemed, Jesus gave them the same message in all charity.

What strategy might we use not to lose patience, to enjoy the same result in the long run that Jesus got from James and John? How do we break through to those who keep making the same mistake, keep repeating the same falsehoods, keep aspiring to mastery instead of love? What Jesus had to do, for all His illustration and all His wisdom, was to live what He taught. He had to show them the Truth by living it, to teach James and John to pour themselves out by pouring Himself out.

Our Lord did not throw a tantrum; he did not berate His rather slow learners; he did not humiliate them for their desire to be on top. Instead, He patiently endured His trials, so that James and John would know that He loved them despite their sin. He didn’t bring them into the inner circle only once they were perfect. He showed them that the intimacy He offered was to help them become perfect.