

September 19, 2021

Father Ed's Sunday Reading

(continued)

The first time Jesus told them this Peter reacted very strongly and Jesus reacted more strongly still. This time they are more cautious. They still do not understand what he means but they do not dare to ask him; they don't want to reveal their inability to see. We can sympathise with them.

Jesus, they have acknowledged, is the Messiah, the Anointed King of Israel. How then can he face a fate like this – and from some of his own people? And, further, they have seen all that he has been doing: healing the sick, bringing sinful people back to God, liberating people from evil powers. They have seen his popularity with the crowds who pursue him everywhere.

At the same time, of course, Jesus has been very outspoken. He has attacked what he regards as the hypocrisy of many religious leaders. He has criticised the over-legalistic interpretation of the Law and false ways of evaluating people's goodness.

He is running into a paradox of human living, namely, the hatred that the good person engenders. It is put so well in the First Reading: "Let us lie in wait for the virtuous man." Why? "Because he annoys us and opposes our way of life, reproaches us for our breaches of the law and accuses us of playing false to our upbringing."

Jesus annoyed many people, he did oppose their way of life and of being false to the real meaning of their traditions, of worshipping only with their lips but with hearts far from God. While he hung on the cross they mocked him. "If you really are the Son of God, come down and then we will believe!" Or as the First Reading puts it in mocking tones: "Let us see if what he says is true, let us observe what kind of end he himself will have. If the virtuous man is God's son, God will take his part and rescue him from the clutches of his enemies."

In their twisted thinking, they abuse him with punishment and torture just to see how good he really was and whether God was really with him. "Let us test him with cruelty and with torture, and thus explore this gentleness of his and put his endurance to the proof. Let us condemn him to a shameful death since he will be looked after – we have his word for it." The same kind of thing is practised by torturers still.

All of this was released in Jesus. His gentleness and endurance and his love for us were proved beyond doubt. And he was looked after though not in the way they anticipated. He was allowed to drink the cup of suffering to the very dregs, dying a most awful death. But that moment of final surrender into the Father's hands – "Into your hands I surrender my life" and "It is finished" – was the moment of glory, the moment of exaltation, of being lifted up to the right hand of the Father, leading the way for us to follow.

All of this the disciples at this stage do not understand but they will in time. Not only that, many of them will follow in his footsteps and be themselves the victims of hatred and recrimination.

The key word is "delivered" or "handed over" (in Greek *paradidomi*, παραδίδωμι; in Latin *tradere*). It is a theme word running through the New Testament. John the Baptist was "handed over" to Herod to be executed. Jesus was handed over by Judas to his fellow-Jews. They, in turn, handed him over to the Romans they hated. Later, the disciples themselves will be handed over to kings and rulers. And, in every Eucharist, the Body of Jesus is handed over for us to break and share together.

Later, Jesus and his group arrived at Capernaum in Galilee. While they were in the "house" he asked them a question. This "house" is mentioned several times in Mark without being identified. It is the place where Jesus seems to stay whenever he is in the town. Is it the house of Peter or of someone else? It does not really matter. It is, basically, the place where Jesus gathers with his disciples. It is a symbol of the Church, of every house where small communities of Christians used to gather in the name and in the company of their Lord and as they still do today.

Jesus asked them a question: "What were you arguing about on the road?" We have another key word here: 'road' (Greek, *hodos*, ὁδός). Every time they are travelling with Jesus they are "on the road". Because Jesus himself is the Road: he is the Way, he is Truth and Life. So they are being asked what they were doing while on the Way.

They refused to answer and kept silent. They were ashamed. It was not the kind of talk suited to people on the Way. Because they had been arguing which of them was the greatest. Why were they ashamed? Jesus had not said anything yet. It has been suggested that, since Jesus has already told them twice that he is going to die, then – unthinkable though it was – it might be true. In that case, who would become the leader of their group?

When Jesus asked them what they had been talking about, they were highly embarrassed. They could hardly say, "Well, since you are going to be killed in the near future, we were wondering which of us should take over."

However, as usual, Jesus knew exactly what was going on in their minds. He sat down and spoke just to the inner circle of the Twelve, the future leaders of the community. "If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all." Once again he throws an idea at them which is in total contradiction to everything they had ever been told.