

There are different ways we can approach today's gospel. I bet you are all familiar with the most common interpretation: James and John were seeking positions of power which angered the other apostles--who also wanted power but were too afraid to ask. Jesus had to straighten them all out: "whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." Greatness in the kingdom of God is not determined by power but by humility.

I'm going to add another layer to James' and John's request later but first I want to talk about the first reading. That reading comes from Isaiah's oracle of the suffering servant. That prophecy is perfectly fulfilled by Jesus. Today's reading began by telling us that God was pleased to crush the servant in infirmity. Other translations of the Bible say that "it was the Lord's will to crush the servant with pain." Both versions sound horrible, especially in a world in which so many innocent people have suffered from abuse. That opening sentence makes God sound like a crazy supervillain who rejoices in causing pain and suffering even to his own beloved son. That's not what is going on.

I'm going to try to explain this by looking again at this copy of Rublev's icon of the Holy Trinity. It shows the three angels who visited Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament. Those angels have also been understood as representing the three persons of the Holy Trinity. When I brought this icon in on Trinity Sunday I used this interpretation of it which comes from the book "Rescued" by Fr John Riccardo. In the icon, God the Father has just seen the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden and he says: "Adam and Eve are lost and they have been captured by the enemy. Who will go and save them?" The Son is looking at the Father and he says, "I will save them. I will bring them home." The Holy Spirit is looking down in sadness because he knows the price that the son will have to pay.

Reading Isaiah from a Christian perspective, why is God the Father pleased with the unspeakable suffering of his beloved son? It is because Jesus has willingly taken it upon himself in order to save us, his Father's beloved, yet lost, other children. The reason Jesus was willing to do this is because a price had to be paid for sin. The wages of sin is death. Breaking the covenants meant death. It's a price we have to pay because we are the ones who sin, but we can't pay that price on our own. Jesus took that burden on himself and paid the price for us so that our

relationship with God can be restored. It's not the pain that was pleasing to God, it's the loving sacrifice that Jesus willingly embraced.

Some might argue, what about the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus said, "Father let this cup pass from me?" Those words are the natural response of a human to death and suffering which was not part of God's original plan for creation. Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. While he sweated blood in anticipation of the suffering that he was about to endure, he trusted in the will of his heavenly Father and embraced what had to be done in order to bring us back into communion with that same Father. Knowing what had to be done, Jesus stepped into the breach and offered himself as the perfect sacrifice. He is the perfect eternal high priest offering the perfect eternal sacrifice as described in the letter to the Hebrews.

All of this is what Jesus meant in his reference to his cup and baptism in today's gospel. Drinking the cup is an Old Testament metaphor for accepting a destiny assigned by God. In Jesus' case, drinking the cup is to accept suffering and death as expiation for sin; an innocent man paying the price for sinners. The baptism is to be Jesus' crucifixion and death for the salvation of the human race. James, John and the other apostles will drink from that cup and be baptized with that same baptism to the extent a human being can be. James was the first apostle to be martyred. John was the only apostle not martyred but tradition tells us that eventually died after years of persecution and exile.

All of what I have just spoken about is what is known as redemptive suffering. In Paul's letter to the Colossians, Paul wrote: "In my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church." This should not be understood as a defection in what happened on the cross. A better way to understand it is as an invitation for us to unite our own sufferings to those of Christ and allow him to give them meaning. You might ask, how is whatever I am going through helping whatever it is I am praying or fasting for? An example for myself is that I pray and fast for missing native and indigenous women and children\*\* and for Native Americans in general. What good do those small sacrifices actually do? From my perspective, I don't know...but God does and when I unite my "sufferings" with those of Jesus', God uses them in the best possible way. We just offer them up and place them into His hands and let them use them in the way He knows is best. So don't despair during

times of pain and suffering. Turn it over to Jesus and let him put all of that to good use.

I promised another layer to James' and John's request to sit at Jesus' left and right in his messianic kingdom. I'm not contradicting the traditional understanding of today's gospel. Instead, I'm inviting us to see a possible motive beyond selfish ambition. Is it possible that James and John could have been motivated by a desire other than power? Could it be that they wanted to be as close to Jesus as possible? Isn't that--or shouldn't that be--the inner desire of all our hearts? Don't we want to be as close as possible to Jesus?

Through his suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus has given us the ability to do just that. He is present wherever two or three gather in his name. He is most concretely present in the Eucharist. We can visit him any time we want in the Adoration Chapel and gaze upon his Eucharistic face as his heart speaks to our hearts. We can't get any closer to him than when we receive him in Holy Communion where he becomes part of us and we become part of him. Today, let us all spend some time in prayer and thank Jesus for the love he has shown by laying down his life for our own. Let us thank him for the gift of His Body and Blood which allows us to be forever physically one with him.

\*\* For more information about Missing Native American and Indigenous Women here is one resource:

<https://www.nativehope.org/en-us/understanding-the-issue-of-missing-and-murdered-indigenous-women>