

We Are Able

21st Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 24 (29) B, October 17, 2021

“Pride,” it is said, “goeth before the fall.” That is, with vanity’s banner held high before us, people march heedlessly to their doom, and most of the time do not even know it. Like unto it is the modern saying, often cast as ancient, that “Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad” – meaning not angry but crazy, deluded, or otherwise lacking the use of reason. One notes that anger, like any passion, can often rob one by itself of the use of reason, and that acting in pursuit of one or another passionate emotion is often, at its root, an act of pride, the deepest of all sins, and the one from which all others flow.

The opening lines of this morning’s gospel bring both of those sayings to mind. The moment we hear what Zebedee’s two sons find it fitting to say and to ask, we know that they are in for it. What vanity, madness, arrogance, or pride makes one think one can stand before the Lord himself, God’s beloved son and Christ standing right there in the flesh, and ask him to sign a blank check and hand it to you? “Teacher,” James and John ironically begin, as though they still see themselves as needing to learn, “We want you to do whatever we want, whatever we ask.”

Oh, you think to yourself, you sad and sorry sweet young men. You have no idea what you just said, or at least I hope not. At best, that way madness lies. At worst... ..well, as the saying goes, John was the one who homeless on Patmos died, most likely after having cared for Jesus’s mother, and almost certainly while serving in the emperor’s slave pits, after seeing the Lord’s salvation. But that would be many years from now. James was beheaded in Jerusalem, not long after Jesus died – or was that the James that was Jesus’s brother? It appears it was both of them, as the tales tell, cut down by the sword, by soldiers haplessly sighing.

So, in a way, they got what they wanted: to sit, or at least fall, at his side: one on his right, and the other on his left. They, indeed, drank the cup of which he drank, and were baptized in the same blood and agony, tears and sweat that he was – but let us not forget the supreme arrogance of their request, or Jesus’s response to it.

A lot of people, when Jesus lived, asked him to do a lot of things. Sometimes he said “Yes,” sometimes he said “No,” and sometimes, like in this passage, he responded with a question. A lot of people, after Jesus left, asked – and still ask – him to do a lot of things. Sometimes we feel, or think we feel, a “Yes,” sometimes a “No,” sometimes a question, but often, I suspect, we feel exactly what Paul said we’d feel: the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the one He sent to be with us after He ascended on high, ne’er to return until the last days, praying with us, and even for us, in a sigh too deep for words (Rom. 8:26).

But not James, and not John – at least not on this day. They come before their teacher, their rabbi, not asking, “Teacher, what can we do for you?” or “What ought we do in your name?” but “Jesus, ol’ buddy, here’s what we want you to do for us,” as though they were a couple of wise guys and Jesus a friend of theirs who owed them a favor. It’s difficult to find the words with which to say how wrong it is to treat Jesus this way, then or now – how wrong it is to act as though the mission and ministry of the Son of Man and the Word Made Flesh were to fulfill our wishes, desires, and dreams, or to meet our immediate and emergent needs. Jesus did not come down, then or now, to physically or metaphorically “take the wheel,” as that unhelpful (if well-intended) heretical song lyric would have it. Far closer to the mark is Julia Ward Howe’s insight in the final verse of the “The Battle Hymn of the Republic:”

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me:

As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.¹

(We would say, “people.”) Sometimes that “die” is rendered as “live”: “Let us live to make them free.” Be that as it may, the message remains the same: let us live and die unto the Lord, holy, free, and setting others free as well – from poverty, from chains, and from delusions. We note, as did Lincoln in his 2nd inaugural, that both sides in that great civil war prayed to the same God, though the prayers of neither were answered fully. We also note many a sigh, in the field of battle as in the slave-labor camps – “plantations” is an offensive euphemism – ran too deep for words.

To put this more simply: Ask not what God can do for you. Ask what God needs you to do as God marches on.

But John and James do not, even when Jesus responds – again? What is this, three weeks in a row now, with a question: “What is it you want me to do?” When they tell him what it is, he says what any reader would be thinking, smh, lol. Fellas, you have no idea what you just asked, do you? They don’t, though they are quick enough not to say so or to question him any further, so he asks them two more questions, “Can you drink from the cup from which I drink? Be baptized as I will be?” Sure, Jesus, no problem – that is, “We are able.”

And that, my friends, we should admire. They got no idea what they’re saying, but you gotta admire the way they say it. It’s one thing to volunteer to bear a burden, or agree to suffer, when you know what that burden or suffering will be. It’s quite another to agree to it before you know what it is – to give to Jesus a blank check of your own, as it were, even as you get that he’s not going to give you the one you asked him for. Their courage in this one must count as a virtue, though the pride they take in it is still folly. Zebedee and his wife might’ve raised fools, but they

¹ Source: Julia Ward Howe, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” *The Atlantic*, February 1862.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1862/02/the-battle-hymn-of-the-republic/308052/>.

raised honest fools, and Jesus and the rest of the disciples could see no lie their eyes. It makes the next part easier to absorb, and from it come great insights into the need for servant leadership, though one notes that Jesus's sense of service, or servitude, involved giving his life as the Son of Man "as a ransom for many." As we say in the Burial Office, whether we live or die, we do so to the Lord.

It's what he did – He, Jesus, that very Son of Man, as the passage from Hebrews this morning reminds us. He didn't want to – indeed, he prayed fervently and with bitter tears that he might not, that this cup he was to drink should pass from him. That prayer was not granted – so the next time we wonder why God didn't grant one of our prayers, we should remember that He didn't even grant all the ones Jesus put out there. However, Jesus's next one was granted, because it was properly phrased, "Not my will, O Lord, but Thine be done." That is the best form of prayer I know that uses words – the best prayers, as I said before, are when the Spirit sighs within us and those sighs are too deep for words. But Jesus's prayer here was much the same as the one his mother made at his conception (the Annunciation): "Let it be done unto me according to Thy will." Neither of them sounds quite like a ringing endorsement, but each is obedient, whether for birth or for death, and to the ransom of many. In obeying him, and obeying as he obeyed, we find our salvation, our perfection, and our freedom.

Ah, yes, you say, but obey what? Well, the two great commandments, of course: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." What else? No law has authority for us, as followers of Christ, that has not its root in these. No act can be good unless it comport with them. Anything we ask or do that does not flow from them we ask or do in vain – out of vanity, that is, and in pride. And pride goeth before the fall.

Discernment here is needed, too, however. A root of the phrase, "Those whom the gods would destroy they first make mad," comes in Sophocles's play *Antigone*. As
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that tragedy moves into its deeper horrors, and a young man is about to make a fatal, if grand, decision, Sophocles has the Chorus reflect that, “Evil often appears good to one whom a god would bring down” (ll.620-3). We must think carefully, and judge wisely, about any course of action that we think good, and must understand and be able to articulate why it is good. *Cui bono*, the lawyers say. Whom will this action benefit? Ought they benefit from it? *Cui malum* one might also ask: Whom will this hurt? Ought they be hurt? Ought we be the one(s) to bring that hurt? Would we want whatever it is we think about doing to be visited upon us? If everyone did likewise under the same conditions, would that make for a better, fairer, kinder world? Being selfish, self-focused, or self-serving in our answers and in our intentions would make it all too easy to answer these questions less honestly than we need to, typically to our own and others’ harm. The gifts that T.S. Eliot’s Yeats says are reserved for age include “...the shame / Of motives late revealed, and the awareness / Of things ill done and done to others’ harm / Which once you took for exercise of virtue” (*Little Gidding*, ll.141-144). When one is in the midst of such clarity, “Then fools’ approval stings, and honour stains” (l.145), and one is all-too well acquainted with shame, regret, and grief.

As Jesus says elsewhere, “Evils must needs come, but woe to those by whom they come;” and as at least one prophet says, “Who sows the wind shall reap the whirlwind.” Much of the evil that people do is seen as good by those who do it, or at least necessary – and more’s the pity, then, since nothing that is not good could ever truly be necessary. James and John, as young men in a hurry, show a minor form of this as they speak in pride and folly. They thought they were exercising sound judgment and asking for something good when they asked Jesus to do what they wanted, but they were not. Nor are we when we ask as they did, serving ourselves when we pretend we’re serving others.

In the passage we heard first this morning, the writers of Isaiah capture the sensibility of one who can resist this dilemma – one who can tell evil from good even when a god wishes to destroy them. The Man of Sorrows, despised and rejected, is one such. Jesus, if you think about it, was another – a man born doomed to die, in torment, at the height of his maturity and power – which is why Christians quickly came to view this passage as a prophecy about him. But it isn't – or, at least, it isn't only that. What is concerns is a man who is set aside, made holy, cast out, someone who is wounded for and no doubt by the transgressions of the people he lives among, a man who loses everything but the chance to show his integrity. His showing it, his acting without deceit or violence even in the midst of his sorrow, is what heals those who witness it, so powerful is the shame involved in that witness, a shame that is the antithesis of pride and the antidote to folly. “What is hateful to your neighbor, do not do” – and if you do, may the shame you see in your neighbor's suffering bring you to your knees, repenting, and hoping to be spared the same fate.

Such is the cup from which Jesus was to drink, and about which James and John said “We are able” when he asked them if they could as well. They did not know what they were agreeing to, anymore than we do when we echo their answer in our prayers and promises. But we will learn, if we keep on living, what integrity requires of us, if we have not done so already. Pride may go before the fall, and it may lead us to fall. Integrity is what stands us up afterwards, if anything can. *Amen.*