

What Will Ye That I Should Do for You?

18th Sunday after Pentecost C, 10/9/22

That's a good question. Last week, the preacher asked a different question, if also a good one. It was: "What Does the Lord Require of Us?" 'Ask not', to set that message in the Key of Kennedy, 'what your God can do for you. Ask what you can do for your God'. That is as it should be. The answer, from the words of the prophet Micah, are good ones: "Do justice, show mercy, walk humbly with thy God". Whether or little faith or great, we have work to do; faith without works is dead. So we got that. What that means for today is that we can ask the next question: What would you like your God to do for you?

One is tempted to respond as my Irish aunt would to such a question: "Lord, give them sense" – 'them' being whoever it was then currently showing a lack of it – "and me more money." From each according to their ability, as it were, and to each according to their need.

I'm sorely tempted to stop right there – but we must not ignore the widow from Zarephath, her son, or the blind men sitting by the side of the road when Jesus and apparently half of Jericho come walking by. He asked it of them, after all.

First, the widow and her son, trying to keep on living in the midst of a drought and the famine it's led to. There had been no rain, not even dew, for ages – for as long, 1st Kings tells us, as the prophet Elijah says so. Elijah, the last of the tin can sailors in a benighted Israel, is trying to break the power of a king he does not like, and a queen he likes even less – Ahab and Jezebel – and is willing to starve their people in order to do it. Elijah has imposed crippling sanctions, as it were, which tend to hit the poorest the hardest, whatever their justification. As is often the case with Elijah, and with Ahab and Jezebel, this story is written from a limited (dare one say biased?) perspective. It tends to confuse a struggle for justice with a struggle for power, making

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it difficult to know quite how to take it. I suggest we take it much as we now take Shakespeare's *Richard III*: an accurate and chilling study of power mis-taken and mis-used, even if the historical figure behind the protagonist was really not as bad as the play makes him out to be.

Why, then, has Elijah cut off the water supply? Because the king and this queen, in the story, have done what far too many rulers then and now have also done: used their power to serve themselves, follow false gods, rip people off, lie to them, and get them killed. They have done the opposite of what Micah said we are to do. They do not do justice, show no mercy, and don't walk humbly with anyone. Their lands and people are cursed as a result of it. Elijah enforces that curse, which scriptural glosses are keen to have us believe is what God wants, even if the text does not quite say so.

So, whatever the reason, the woman in Zarephath has lost her husband and is about to lose her son, and she knows it. They are starving to death. Along comes Elijah, looking for food. The Lord sent him, and told the woman to take care of him. "With what?" you can imagine her asking. "Ask not what your God can do for you..." indeed.

But then, Elijah's starving, too. He'd been drinking water from the river, and eating bread some ravens brought – from where? When did the Ravens get into baking, in addition to blowing big leads in football games? – but that's all over now, baby blue. The bread's all gone, and the river's run dry, almost as if the Lord is making the prophet live through the same hell he's inflicted on other people. Never, goes this heavenly lesson on leadership, ask people to bear a burden you're not willing to shoulder yourself. ('Ask not what your people should do for you...')

Elijah gets to where God told him to go, sees a woman, and begs her for a drink, just a sip, "a little water in a vessel." She goes to get some. At least one well at Zarephath had not (yet) run dry – towns don't last where there is neither river nor well – but

didn't give them enough water to water crops. Elijah then asks for bread – just a morsel, mind you – but the widow says no. The last of what I have, she says, I'm giving to me and my son. After that, we're finished.

Not to worry – the Lord will provide, says Elijah, and the sad little family gets enough to live on, both flour and oil, until the rains return and the new harvest is brought in. We are meant to feel relieved by this. The Lord didn't send his prophet to eat the last of some family's food and then watch them starve to death. (When the boy did succumb to the diseases caused by hunger, Elijah even brought him back, which I think was very nice of him.) But I do have to wonder what all the other families in town or country thought, and if they wondered why the Lord's chose to free some people from hunger, but not all?

If we are to do justice and act with mercy, Lord, why not You?

Why not, indeed. That is the great question, and is shot through the Bible like veins of gold through rock, shining even in the darkest places, if there be but a little light. If you have the power to feed everyone, Lord, why don't You? Or is that Your curse upon us even now, as it was said unto the first man as he lost paradise, that “cursed is the ground for thy sake” and “in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return to the ground” (Gen. 3:17,19)? Must it be said that, in this, that “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether” (Ps.19:9)?

Perhaps, perhaps. But we opened with a different question, what would we like our God to do for us? To answer that, we turn to a different psalm (90:12,14-15):

Teach us to number our days, that we might apply our hearts to wisdom.... Satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we might rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years where we have seen evil.

Which leads us back to today's gospel passage, in which two blind men sit by the side of the road when Jesus and what looks like half of Jericho come walking by.

Blind man sit by the road and he cried.
Blind man sit by the road and he cried.
Blind man sit by the road and he cried, Oh, oh, oh:
Show me the way-aay-aay, show me the way-aay-ayy,
show me the way-ayy-ayy, the way to go home.

That was how this gospel passage was ear-wormed into us when I was young and cast by mischance among evangelicals. The tune, likely that of a spiritual from slavery times, is what worms into the ear; the words follow along for the ride. Except that the words do not convey what the blind men asked, not at all. Not in Matthew's gospel, nor in that of Luke, nor of that in Mark where those two writers first read it. No, what the blind asked for, as everyone around cursed them as so much roadside trash in the way of their following Jesus, or Jeezus, was that he "have mercy on us" and "that our eyes may be opened." Literally.

That is: We cannot see. We want to see. Have mercy on us. Let us see.

Which he does. What do you want the Lord to do for you? Where I am blind, make me see. I can find my way from there on my own. I'll decide for myself whether to go back home, or to go somewhere else. I might even do what the newly sighted do in the gospel before us: join in with those following Jesus, and follow him in turn. They're my eyes, after all, and my feet. I'll look at what I want to and go where I will.

Give me the power to do what I can for myself, Lord. I can't do that on my own. Once I have that power, I know what to use it for. I just need your help to get started. Can you do that for me, Lord? Even with all these people standing around not wanting you to waste your time on me? I'd sure appreciate it if you could. You gave me eyes already, but then something or someone took their power away from me. Get it back for me, and I'll be fine. Jesus, having compassion on them, did exactly as they'd asked – and earned himself two new followers as he did so, in the best way

possible: by giving them the power and the freedom to choose to do what they wanted, and getting whatever was in their way out of their way as they did so.

That's more than the psalmist asked for, and that the widow of Zarephath asked for. All they sought was mercy and relief from affliction – hard enough to find in their world, as in ours. They were, or would have been, satisfied simply with the removal of pain. The blind men, too, asked for no more than their sight restored, but what they might not have realized until it was that what they were really asking for was freedom. They sought, they needed, they craved the freedom to be fully as they were born to be and as they desired to be: able to do all that a person can do, and be free from bondage and constraint so that they could do it. They wanted God to give them what Thomas Jefferson, among others, noted as the natural rights of all people: to live, to be free, and to pursue freely what it means to flourish. To eat freely the bread they grew ourselves, even if they had to raise it from ground God cursed, and to make their world such that none may wring their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, extending the curses of injustice and misrule to the ruin of all.

They wanted what we want: autonomy in body, mind, and spirit, that we may be all we can be, so that we can choose to be as Colossians encourages: compassionate and kind, patient, forgiving, loving, and in harmony. None of those behaviors can be compelled, and they do not flourish where people are not free. At times they endure, as a tree might endure the toxins of cities or the abuse of parasites, but they do not flourish. They need freedom to do that – we all do.

So, then, what do we want our God to do for us? To set us free, and keep us free, letting us do justice and be full of mercy, setting others free even if God can't or won't. While life lasts, let us live it well, that the world may be better, once we must leave it, for out having been here for a time. That – and to give other people sense and me (well, us) more money. On the off chance you've the chance, Lord. That would be plenty. That would be more than enough. *Amen.*

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