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THE FIRST WILL BE THE SLAVE OF ALL

By David C. Robinson, SJ

Today's Gospel

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." He replied, "What do you wish me to do for you?" They answered him, "Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left." Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" They said to him, "We can." Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink, you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right or at my left is not mine to give but is for those for whom it has been prepared." When the ten heard this, they became indignant at James and John. Jesus summoned them and said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, 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."

Reflection

In the company of Jesus' disciples, we might reasonably expect to see a band of brothers committed to the self-giving mission of their master, focused on the ministry of love and healing, and free of the political power-bartering that marks the political and social communities of their time. Yet, in Mark's Gospel, we witness the bickering among them about their status in the impending glory of the Kingdom to be initiated by their Messianic master. Indeed, in a close inspection of Scripture since Eden, we unearth a history of ambition and human power structures that seem alien to the covenantal bond of God with the Chosen People. When Adam and Eve choose to place themselves above God's edicts, they create an inheritance of human vanity, birthed in the murder of Abel by Cain because of jealousy. In the lineage of Abraham, the history of deception continues, with the manipulation of his grandson Jacob that cost his brother, Esau, the family inheritance. Jacob's sons, jealous of their brother, Joseph, sell him into slavery in Egypt, where he becomes the steward to one of Pharaoh's officials. As a result, when the Israelites migrate to Egypt, Joseph becomes their protector. The people live in a state of servitude until Moses journeys to free them, and leads them to the Promised Land of Canaan, where Abraham dwelt over 400 years before. During this new time of Canaanite occupation, the people of Israel establish a series of Judges to rule over them. Since there is no singular authority, there is no dynamic center of governance, and the Judges give way to kingly rule. In its turn, the united kingdom splits in two, forming the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The political divides end in exile. When the Persian king, Cyrus, allows the people to return, a new period of Jewish tradition begins. Subsequent imperial conquests lead to the end of Jewish independence, and we arrive at the period of Roman domination which shapes the known world at the time of Jesus.

Jesus reveals to his followers the promise of a new Kingdom, one centered on fidelity to God, and to the Spirit of peace, love, forgiveness, and healing. When the disciples are tempted by the seductions of prestige and power, the lures that led to the cycle of jealousy, greed, and desire for status in Jewish history, he calls them back to their unity in the new Gospel of faith, the saving communion of love that heals the scars of vanity and division. The following centuries of Christian history do not escape the temptations of the past, but the voice of Jesus continues to urge his disciples to re-discover the Spirit of unity which is their heritage and their legacy.

In our own day, we confront the same ancient deceptions of ego, which blunt

the truths of our better selves—turning to the lies of self-promotion, vicious treatment of others, and a neglect of the values that build up rather than tear down the fabric of hope and faith that sustain our humanity in God. Yet, the voice of Jesus continues among us, admonishing us to reject what destroys, and embrace what nurtures life and loving relationships. Like our ancestors, we choose our path. May we choose wisely.



Spirit of Peace
Photo by David C. Robinson, SJ

For Pondering

- What do you feel are the temptations you confront in the current social climate we inhabit? Do they contradict the message of Jesus in your life?
- If you were in a conversation with Jesus, what do you feel he would urge you to embrace in your daily walk of faith?
- How might you bring a spirit of peace and respect into your encounters

with those who disagree with you?

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