

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

In a few weeks, we'll hear again about Thomas, one of Jesus' disciples. He's often called "doubting Thomas" for his rejection of an important part of the Gospel, part of what Jesus preached to the disciples today: "*after three days [the Son of Man] will rise*" from the dead. Oh, the disdain heaped upon Thomas. It's a wonder anyone is given the name Thomas, so sullied it is, like Judas, and Ahab, and Jezebel.

And yet, is Thomas any worse than Peter? Just a few weeks ago, we heard Jesus scold Peter for trying to keep Jesus from His mission to save mankind. What biting words Jesus used: "*Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man*" (Mark 8:33). And that was right after Jesus had begun "*to teach [the disciples] that [He had to] suffer ... and be rejected ... and be killed, and ...rise again*" (Mark 8:31). That was His first passion prediction. In a week, we'll hear again, how, as this passion began, Peter denied knowing Jesus three times.

And what about James and John, the sons of Zebedee? They were in that "big three" grouping we always hear together: Peter, James, and John when Jesus raised up the dead girl (Mark 5:37), when Jesus went up on the mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:2), when Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:33).

In the Gospel, Jesus had just finished telling the disciples for the third time of His impending passion, death, and resurrection, and what do James and John do? They tell Jesus, "*Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.*" Now one could put a good construction on this open-ended statement. Perhaps they would ask for some godly purpose. But Jesus' inquiry yielded nothing but self-aggrandizement. "*Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.*" Seat us in the positions of prestige and power in Your kingdom. No, "*no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside*" (Rom. 3:11-12). Whether Thomas, or Peter, James, John, or us, man's ways are not God's ways (Isa. 55:8).

In the Gospel, understandably, the other disciples were indignant with the two brothers, but it did afford Jesus a teaching opportunity. His glory is not what they imagine.

Jesus began His teaching, asking the two disciples a cryptic question: "*Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?*" James and John seemed to think they knew what Jesus was talking about, and they answered: "*We are able.*" But did they understand? Could they drink this cup? Would they be baptized with this baptism?

What exactly is the cup Jesus was about to drink? Surely, He's using a figure of speech here. The disciples seemed to think the cup was a glorious one, like the glory Jesus displayed at His transfiguration, but is that the cup to which Jesus referred? Likely not. Rather, it is the cup of His suffering and death that He had just foretold for a third time, that He would be betrayed and condemned, that He would be mocked and spat upon, that He would be flogged and killed. Truly, this servant of God's appearance would be "*marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind.*" He would be "*despised and rejected by men.*" He would pour out "*his soul to death*" (Isa. 52:14; 53:3, 12) ... the cup of God's wrath upon sin. This is the cup that Jesus prayed in the Garden to be removed from Him. Yet He submitted to the Father's will: "*Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will*" (Mark 14:36).

Would His disciples drink of this cup? To a certain extent they would, as do we. They, too, would be despised and rejected for the sake of Jesus and His Gospel — as we often are. Most, too, would experience horrific sufferings and die horrific deaths for that same Gospel — I do not pray that upon us. But none of them would do it as Jesus did, "*[bearing] our griefs and [carrying] our sorrows; ... pierced for our transgressions [and] crushed for our iniquities*" (Isa. 53:4-5), the innocent servant making "*intercession for the transgressors*" by bearing their sins (Isa. 53:11-12). None but Christ could drink that cup of wrath and woe, and He drank it to the dregs.

The baptism Jesus mentions, too, is a figurative one, not a baptism of water, but of blood, of death. This is the baptism that Jesus came to accomplish as He said: "*I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished*" (Luke 12:50). And when we are baptized into Christ, we are united to this bloody baptism of death, sprinkled with the blood of the new covenant (Heb. 9:24). As St. Paul says, by baptism, we are united to Him in a death like His, that we might be united with Him in a resurrection like His (Rom. 6:5).

This, then, is Jesus' glory — to be lifted up on a cross for the sins of the world, to drink the cup of God's wrath as a sacrifice of atonement. And those places to Jesus' right and to His left — not places of power and prestige, but of ignominy — He could not grant to James and John. They had already been appointed for others. Jesus "*was numbered with the transgressors*" (Isa. 53:12) — "*with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left*" (Mark 15:27).

Second, in response, Jesus taught all the disciples again what it means to be great. It's not the first time He had taught this. Right after the second telling of His passion and death, the disciples were discussing who was the greatest. That time, Jesus told them, "*If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all*"

(Mark 9:35). The answer is the same this time. Greatness is not measured by worldly standards of domination, power, authority, prestige. As Jesus' disciples, greatness is measured by humility and service: "*whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.*" It's just as true now as it was then.

Third, Jesus taught: this servant is exactly Jesus Himself. He "*came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many,*" His blood the price for our redemption offered up to set us free from bondage to sin and death and the power of the devil, His life unto death a substitute for ours that we might live to Him, His body sacrificed for us, for our forgiveness, for our salvation.

"*For freedom Christ has set us free,*" says St. Paul, set free that our faith might work through love (Gal. 5:1, 6), that is, through service. Jesus calls His disciples (that is, us) to this kind of servanthood — one like His — thinking of self last and others first, thinking of self not as greatest but as least, thinking of self not as one to be waited on, but as one who waits on others (Luke 22:27) ... serving sacrificially.

Of course, our sacrifices aren't atoning sacrifices, but sacrifices of praise. St. Paul exhorts us, "*by the mercies of God, ... present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship*" (Rom. 12:1). Our service to neighbor is the fruit of Christ's service to us — on the cross, delivered up here by Word and Sacrament.

God grant that we might "*continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God*" for Christ's sacrificial service to us. May "*the fruit of [our] lips ... [ever] acknowledge his name,*" Jesus, the Lord who saved us by giving His life as an atonement for us, forgiving our iniquities and remembering our sins no more. And God grant that we might be who He has made us, having sprinkled us with the blood of the new covenant. May we, from the heart, "*not neglect to do good and to share what [we] have, [remembering,] such sacrifices are pleasing to God*" (Heb. 13:16).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.