

Service, Suffering & Salvation

The Gospel of Mark depicts a series of scenarios that deeply perplex us. While travelling through Caesarea Philippi, Jesus revealed His Messianic secret for the first time to His disciples. He told them He “must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mk 8:31). In view of this tragic end, He solemnly advised them to continue to be His disciples, deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Him (8:34). The disciples, however, seemed unaware of the seriousness of Jesus’ revelation.

As wandering missionaries, Jesus and His disciples kept travelling and came to Galilee where Jesus again predicted His Passion. The disciples “did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask Him” (9:32). They were, in dramatic contrast, arguing about who was the greatest amongst themselves. Jesus at that moment reproached them and preached that “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (9:35). The disciples were still ignorant of what their

Master had instructed them and were not sensitive to the relationship between Jesus’ eventual death and this resurrection.

So when they were approaching Jerusalem, Jesus for the third time foretold His imminent destiny, intending to awake the unenlightened students (10:32-24). Again, we read that the disciples failed to heed their Master’s instructions. Instead of realising the need to be servants, they were contending for the future glory which, as they understood and anticipated, their Master would bestow upon them as a reward of simply being His followers (10:35-41).

In disappointment and with sadness, Jesus again pronounced to the disciples, “... whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (10:43-45).

As we read these passages what immediately strikes would be the stubbornness and insensitivity of the disciples. What kind of people were they?

Why would Jesus select them as His inner-circle followers? Did He not pick them from among a great multitude after long hours of prayer? (Lk 6:12). Were they worthy of being His successors? If they did not know Jesus' salvific life and death, what was the point of gathering around Him? Jesus must be spiritually lonely, surrounded by such a group of ignorant and immature students! If we were they, we would have behaved much better! We would not have competed for leadership in a time of impending crisis! We would have understood Jesus' mission and followed Him to the end!

Maybe. Maybe not. It is not the intention of the Gospel of Mark to ridicule or belittle the Twelve Disciples. Rather, it depicts the situation of universal humanity more than the particular disciples. Were we the Twelve, we might have behaved exactly like them or, even worse, we might have failed Jesus more miserably.

Jesus was born into a poor family and raised in the insignificant Nazareth (Jn 1:46). No one in His neighbourhood had expected Him to achieve anything spectacular (Jn 6:42). It was common understanding that only the rich, the famous and the powerful accomplished great things, and Jesus belonged to none

of these. Although His disciples were chosen from the many, they were also of low status, being mostly fishermen (Lk 1:16-20). They did not follow Jesus in order to give away their meager possessions or to save others from a poorer situation than theirs. They were the lowly and the very poor who followed Jesus for gain. The strong should save the weak. The disciples thought that Jesus, with His healing power and eloquence, was strong. He would bring them a good fortune and elevate them to a happier and brighter state which they were not able to achieve by themselves.

Jesus, however, acted against the disciples' wishes and instructed them otherwise. In the first place, He came to the world not for fortune, power or glory. He was keenly conscious of His mission and knew that He came to serve, to suffer and even be killed. That He repeatedly conveyed this message to His disciples illustrates His self-awareness. Based upon this understanding, He taught what true discipleship means. One has to give away all things, to take up one's cross, and to face all kinds of tribulations, even death itself. It also means that one has to serve and to be least among all humankind. This was indeed a difficult message to accept. Who would trade glory for suffering, life for death? No wonder after hearing Jesus, the rich young man's countenance fell and

he left sorrowful (Mk 10:22). Likewise the disciples were astonished, exclaiming, "Then who can be saved?", if the actualisation of the true discipleship remained the only way to the final, heavenly reward (10:26). This is the paradox we find in Jesus' teachings. But as Jesus Himself testified, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God" (10:27).

The way God saves humanity contradicts our human understanding. It is not by means of our intellect or wisdom that we can probe into God's mystery. Rather, it is through Christ crucified, "a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23) that God reveals His saving grace. It is neither the powerful nor the noble who can more easily reach God. On the contrary, God prefers to choose the weak and the lowly, bestowing upon them more blessings. So in the matter of salvation, what we are humanly proud of does not count. It is always God who takes the initiative, and when He does, He "subverts" our logic and intellect.

What Jesus exemplified on earth manifests God's way of salvation. In order to save, He humbled Himself. He demonstrated God's power not through

His divinity but through His humble humanity. Therefore, while His disciples were quarrelling for leadership, He reminded them as their Master He assumed lordship not by giving command but by serving them (Lk 22:24-27). He was lowly and gentle in heart (Mt 11:29). At the Last Supper, to show that He loved His disciples to the end, He washed their feet. Then He added, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (Jn 13:14). What He emphasised was that service, and even suffering, are the source of saving power. That He came to this world, took the form of a servant, emptied and humbled Himself, and obeyed unto death on the cross demonstrates how God wants to accomplish salvation. This is the mystery of God.

The way of God's salvation is from the "bottom up". He wants to save the poor, the weak and the foolish. And He does that through what seems to be poorer, weaker and more foolish. When He reaches the lowest point, His saving power manifests, pervasively and mightily.

To be exalted by God, one begins with serving. Many admirable personalities in the Bible earned their lofty status by service.

We should be reminded that the heavenly angels who always elicit our marvel and love are not God's creation for beauty show. Rather, they are "ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation: (Heb 1:14). The apostle Paul assumed his apostolic authority not because of his worldly pedigree but because of his faithful service to God (1 Tim 1:12). One of the qualifications for being church leaders, such as the elders and the deacons, is the willingness to serve (1 Tim 3:1-5, 8-13; 1 Pet 5:3; Acts 6:1-6). They gain the congregation's respect from being good examples themselves, as well as from contributing to the enhancement of the general spiritual welfare.

We read the passages in the Gospel of Mark about the anxious Jesus and His inert disciples from a critical distance, hence fully aware of where the disciples' blindness lie. But reflecting upon ourselves, we might easily have made the same mistake. Do we not always come to the Lord asking for more grace even though we have already received much? Do we not sometimes take pride in the Christian identity because it might bring us a sense of honour or even privilege? How many of us would think that when the term "Christian" was coined in the early time

(Acts 11:26), it connoted a strong sense of depreciation? We certainly would like to draw near to Jesus not for loss but for gain, wouldn't we? Actually we very much resemble the Twelve Disciples!

Just like the early Christians, not many amongst us are wise, strong and powerful in the worldly sense. But by God's grace and love, we are called to be His co-workers to realise His salvation plan. Very often we tend to think that if we can be "empowered", such as by gaining more knowledge, achieving a higher social status, securing more money, reorganising the church as a more effective group, utilising more advanced mass media, etc, we can easily and quickly carry out God's salvation. In a secular and competitive world, this kind of idea seems reasonable enough. But examined under Jesus' teaching, it simply misses the point. What God demands most is our willingness to serve and suffer for Him; everything else is minor. God knows that we are weak and lowly, but that is not a hindrance to the completion of His saving work. It is exactly our weakness and lowliness as well as our recognition of them that God would use for His divine purpose. As long as we are willing to contribute whatever gifts we have received to the church community, God's work is closer to completion (1 Pet 4:10). In the kingdom of God, service accomplishes all things.

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