

29th Sunday OT – Mark 10:35-45

The account of the journey to Jerusalem in Mark's gospel includes three predictions of Jesus' future sufferings. Each time, the disciples miss the point. After this third prophecy, James and John were the first to disgrace themselves. They not only ignored the words spoken by Jesus, but they betrayed how they have misunderstood the Kingdom which Jesus had been preaching to them in his words and actions since their call. They presumed that in his kingdom, high worldly offices on his right and on his left, would be available. The reader will remember this request when reading the account of the crucifixion ***when two thieves occupy these positions.***

In his response, Jesus spoke mysteriously about a cup and about a baptism. In its original meaning baptism implies a ***letting-go***, a self-abandonment to whatever destiny God has in store. In the context, both refer to the future passion of Jesus and represent a repetition of the teaching that a disciple must be ready to carry the cross behind Jesus. James and John declare their readiness for share both cup and baptism, but in Gethsemane, they will sleep.

The other ten disciples, far from rebuking the false ambition of their brother apostles, show ***that they shared it.*** Let them recall Isaiah's Servant Song, and how the servant gave his life as a ransom, or atonement, for many. This text, together with the words of Jesus over the cup at the Last Supper, are the only specific indications in Mark of the salvific purpose of the death of Jesus. They point the way to a positive doctrine of suffering.

If one studies the history of the Church, you will sadly realize that eventually the Church after the early martyrs took the direction that James and John requested of Jesus (after his third passion prediction)! In 313 AD Constantine transferred the privileges and ceremonial belonging to the imperial court and the highest ranking officials to the bishops and other clergy, and thus made their way into the liturgy. The emperor persuaded the bishops to take over and to exercise some of his own prerogatives.

They don't tell you this in your parish History of the Church. In the same way the leaders of the Church were granted the titles, insignia and privileges which corresponded to the rank with which they had been supplied. They received in addition a number of insignia such as the pallium, the ceremonial napkin, a kind of footwear, distinctive headgear, and probably the golden ring. They also received the right to a throne whose height and design were carefully prescribed, the right to be accompanied by lights and incense, and the privilege

of being greeted with a kiss of the hand. The Bishop of Rome himself had acquired almost the same degree of dignity as the Emperor. He could claim the right to have his portrait hung in public buildings, to be greeted on his arrival at church by a choir of singers, to be waited on at the throne, at the altar with covered hands, and to have people genuflect to him and kiss his foot.

In all fairness, the insignia and privileges which were once the symbol of secular power have been so transformed that they now suppress the individuality of the human person who temporarily holds the office and brings to the forefront of our attention the spiritual nature of the high office which he holds. No wonder it is so easily abused, since the holder of the office can easily deny that he did anything wrong, since it was the office that is guilty.

Once the Church was freed from persecution the Celebration of the Eucharist moved out of the house and into the basilicas. Once Christianity was made the only accepted state religion she became powerful through the guidance of Constantine who handed over to them the power of jurisdiction in civil proceedings between Christians and other Christians, and also between Christians and non-Christians, and no one was allowed to appeal against their judgments. It could only enhance the Church's authority if those who exercised this authority were invested with official badges of rank and surrounded with the splendor of the ceremonies of state. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the original insignia and privileges underwent a radical transformation style, almost to the extent of becoming unrecognizable and moreover, spiritualized.

It is not surprising then, that the Church, which was once a simple religion, celebrated within a family meal in the home has now become a glorious imperial celebration with all the trappings and power of the emperor. It is also not surprising that everyone who wanted to be someone came rushing to be baptized. Those whose life careers would entail working within this new Christian Government needed the seal of baptism, and especially those who wanted to keep their jobs! It is during this time that many of the physical gestures like prostration, bowing, genuflections and the style of the vestments of the Imperial Court, came from this period.

So, in light of today's gospel, do we really want to go back to that time of impersonable imperial silliness or become more pastoral like Pope Francis, where priests not only smell like their sheep but also look like them?