

A Ransom for Many!

Mark 10:32-52 (ESV)

February 23, 2003

“See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise.” What strange good news is this? And what does it have to do with us today? Who is Jesus Christ, crucified, dead, and buried? Who is Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, ascended into heaven, and seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty?

It is not enough that Jesus was a great teacher. Certainly he was, though strangely enough in today’s reading when he foretold his death for the third time his disciples missed the point entirely. It is not enough that he was a great healer. Certainly he was, for the crowds brought their sick to him, though few if any of those seem to have become followers. It is not enough that he was a wonder worker. Certainly he was, for many were astonished and even afraid, but that did not make them believers. Yes, he was all of these, but he was much more.

Jesus Christ is the one who willingly went to his death in Jerusalem, was betrayed by his own followers, and was delivered over to the chief priest and the scribes, the authorities of the highest religion of the time who falsely condemned him to die. Jesus Christ is the one whom they delivered over in turn to the authorities of the Roman Empire, the highest achievement of human law at the time, who wrongly and shamefully executed him. Jesus Christ is the one who knew no sin but who took on our sin, so that on our account and for our sake he suffered being mocked, spit upon, flogged and killed. Jesus Christ is the one whose suffering and death on our account God vindicated by raising him from the dead, restoring him to life, placing him forever beyond the reach of pain, suffering, sickness, or death. Jesus Christ is the very Son of God who died that our sins might be forgiven and who was raised that we might live forever.

Lots of people died at the hands of the Roman Empire. Not one of the rest of them was utterly innocent. A number of people have been kings. Not one of them willingly suffered a sacrificial death that effected the salvation of their people. Jesus Christ alone did all of these things. Jesus Christ alone fulfilled the expectation of his people for an anointed one to be sent from God to save them. And yet, he did this not by grand victory but by apparent defeat in shameful public suffering and death. He was the great and wonderful Christ not despite suffering but instead precisely by

means of what is humanly perceived as the backward way of being the suffering servant of the Lord about whom we read in the prophet Isaiah.

So, what kind of teacher is this? What kind of healer is this? What kind of wonder worker is this, who refused to help himself? We who suffer inevitably in this life—sometimes less, sometimes more, often by our own fault, sometimes by the fault of others—we who suffer inevitably and against our will in this life are here and today joined by the one who comes from God and who also suffers, knowingly and willingly, joining us in the depths of our humanity and mortality, not as some fair weather friend but as one who has indeed borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, one who was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities.

Are you lonely? No one has ever been as alone and lonely as Jesus on the cross, and he went there so that he can be with us now so that we are never alone. Are you in pain? Jesus knows the depths of human pain, the pain of whips and thorns and nails and spear, and he will not forsake us now. Are you unjustly accused and condemned? Jesus has gone there before us, and he will see us through it. Are you dying? We are all dying, some sooner, some later. Jesus, the Son of Man, the Son of God, has faced that terror before us, so that we might have safe passage.

Jesus went to Jerusalem to suffer and die. What is the point? What is the purpose? What do his pain and death accomplish? “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Lord of the universe, came as a suffering servant. His kingship and his suffering are all for the sake of serving. What is the nature of his service? What does it do? To describe and explain this, Jesus borrows some economic language from the slave trade of the day. If someone purchased a slave and set him or her free, that was known as paying the ransom. This is what Jesus did for us. He paid the ransom for many. On the one hand, he is saying that all of us have been slaves to sin, death, evil, misery, brokenness, and blindness. On the other hand, he is saying that he has paid the price to set us free from that slavery, free for life, goodness, faith, joy, wholeness, and obedience. We cannot, and do not have to, pay the price. Our salvation, our reconciliation to God, is a gift.

Of course, there are implications to this ransom. We are fond of saying, “It is my life; I will live it the way I want to!” That is *not* true for Christians. We owe our lives to Christ, and he calls us to live them the way he wants us to live them. Given that Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, is a suffering servant king, what is our discipleship to look like? What would it mean for us to be faithful followers? The disciples who looked only for glory gave us an example of what *not* to do. “We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” Does that sound like our prayers? Are we more concerned about our desires than about the will of God? Jesus was

going to Jerusalem to die, and they were asking for special seats in heaven, one at his right hand and one at his left.

Just as Christ's life involved suffering, so will the Christian's life involve suffering. It may be intense, visible, outward suffering, as in martyrdom. It may be that our suffering is intense, invisible, inward suffering, as in the breaking down of self-centeredness and the centering of our lives on God. Either way, the life and death of Jesus Christ becomes the pattern for our life and death.

"Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?" Jesus was not talking about the Lord's Supper. He was talking about the cup of suffering and death, of which he himself prayed, "Remove this cup from me." "Are you able...to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" He was not talking about the river Jordan. He was talking about the baptism of the cross, the baptism of death, the baptism of burial, immersion in the tomb. And he promised this to his disciples: "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized."

In addition to the suffering, the service of Christ's life also sets the pattern for our own. "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." In that Jesus Christ came to be a servant; how much more are we who would follow him to be servants? We gather here to worship God, and then we go forth to serve— at home, at school, at work, at play, serving as we have been served, giving because God has given to us. This is the basis of all mission, all stewardship, and all benevolence. The life of discipleship is not an easy trip to special seats in heaven. To follow Jesus Christ is to swim against the stream of the world in which we live.

The disciples had a hard time seeing that the Christ would suffer. Blind Bartimaeus saw that the suffering one was the Christ. While he was sitting in the dust at the side of the road, he saw more clearly than anyone else the truth of who Jesus is as he cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Do we see what he saw?

When Bartimaeus cried out, "Jesus, Son of David," it was a way of saying: "Jesus of Nazareth, you are the King of the Jews, you are the rightful heir to the throne of King David, you are the righteous one sent from God to reestablish the kingdom, you are the one whom we have expected and for whom we have waited!" No wonder the crowd tried to silence him: "Be quiet! Do you want these Roman soldiers to arrest us and kill us all? They have their own emperor, and their own gods, and they do not want us naming or crowning someone else as king!"

But the more the crowd tried to silence him, the more clearly blind Bartimaeus saw, and he cried out all the more, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus, whose mind was made up to go to Jerusalem and who was marching steadily in that direction, with disciples straggling out behind him, stood still. “Call him,” he said. “What do you want me to do for you?” “Rabbi, let me receive my sight.” Let me see! “Go your way; your faith has made you well.” And immediately he received his sight. The blind man’s faithful seeing of Jesus became the occasion for Jesus healing his physical blindness, restoring him to health and wholeness, restoring him to full participation in the human community, giving him the opportunity no longer to have to be a beggar living on the generosity of the community but instead to work and to produce and to contribute to the wealth of the community and the well-being of others.

And Bartimaeus used his new sight to follow Jesus on the way. To “follow” is virtually a technical term in the gospels, meaning not only to follow Jesus geographically but also to become his disciple. So “the way” is not only the way to Jerusalem, and not only the way to the cross, but also a new name for the entire way of the Christian life.

Today’s reading from the gospel according to Mark is the word of the living God to us today, an invitation to us to join Bartimaeus in confessing our faith in Jesus Christ. Bartimaeus knew that he needed help, and he knew that Jesus was the only one who could help him. So is Jesus the only one who can make us see as we are supposed to see; we cannot do this for ourselves. If we are not willing to admit our neediness, if we think we see well enough and know all that we need to know, we will miss the invitation and forfeit the new vision. But if we are willing to admit our need for God’s help, if we are willing to admit our blindness, we can join Bartimaeus in praying, “Lord, have mercy upon us! Let us receive our sight.” Then we can join in receiving his healing and join him in his following Christ. To admit our need, to ask for mercy, to trust in Jesus as the giver of mercy, is to be given the new eyes we need with which to see, to have the blindness of our self-centeredness and self-sufficiency taken away, and to be given the courage we need to follow Jesus on the way.

Death, service, and ransom do not have the last word. Following finally leads to the goal. So yet today, in the midst of this life, do we look forward to the life yet to come. For as Jesus taught his first disciples, so does he teach us, not only of his suffering death and forgiving service, and not only of our call to discipleship, but also of his promised resurrection. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” “And after three days he will rise.”

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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