

PENTECOST XXII *Proper 24B* **21 October 2018**

A Homily preached by the Reverend Roger B. White, Rector of St Andrew's Parish, Kent, Connecticut

Isaiah 53.4-12; Psalm 91.9-16; Hebrews 5.1-10; Mark 10.35-45

'Blessed, praised, and adored be our Lord Jesus Christ; on his throne of Glory, in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar, and in the hearts of his faithful people.' This is one of the prayers that traditionally comes at the end of a liturgy such as this one, when everyone who has been assisting at the altar has gathered in the sacristy porch—a room between the nave (where you are sitting) and the sacristy, where everyone has vested. Here at St Andrew's, the sacristy is the room back there, just off the chancel: we have no sacristy porch.

And in a number of Episcopal church buildings, one of the windows in the sacristy porch is usually a Crucifixion scene, Jesus' tortured body suspended on the cross. This is the throne of Glory to which the prayer refers. God's Glory is the self-sacrifice, and at the right hand and the left, wracked on their own crosses, are two bandits, two criminals. This is where James and John say they are ready to be, and the depths of their arrogant naiveté, of the failure to comprehend is staggering, almost brutally comic

But of course they are afraid. Jesus has just, for the third time, predicted what will happen to him when they arrive in Jerusalem, which is almost within eye sight. He is leading his followers there from Galilee, and Mark's Gospel is clear that Jesus is out-pacing them, almost pulling them onward behind him because they simply do not want to go.

Each time that he has told him what he knows awaits him in Jerusalem they have either been confused or have simply denied it, even though his torture, his Passion, has already begun. For his own fears are mounting, which is why he asks James and John in the present tense, 'Are you able to drink the cup that I drink [the cup that I am drinking], or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with [that I am now beginning to undergo]?' And nervously, uncomprehendingly, they say ... 'Sure'.

Any of us might probably have done the something, hoping that the one whom we have insisted we would follow is being ... pessimistic ... about his fate, giving into fears of what, surely, God will not allow

And in his final teaching before he enters the city Jesus yet again instructs his disciples, as clearly as he can, that God's Glory— which they have the call to embrace and to imitate—is in fact about sacrifice. It is no longer to be a sacrifice of animals or of grains: it is to be of themselves. Those who are not my followers, he tells them, others in authority, lord it over everyone, become kinds of tyrants.

'But it is not so among you [my followers] ... whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant'—literally, the deacon who serves the meal—and whoever wishes to be first among you must be [the] slave—even more menial than the waiter or waitress—of all.'

You have got to care for one another, he says, to sacrifice for one another, to give whatever is necessary –time, talents, treasures: whatever you can give, just give. Pour yourself out: love; love one another. I am about to set you an astonishing, an astounding example of what love – God’s love, and human love, too—is capable of doing, of giving. You will see it on the Cross.

And we already know how important this sort of giving, of self-giving, is. Centuries before Jesus lived, one of the prophets whom we know as Isaiah wrote that heart-rending fourth ‘Song of the Suffering Servant’ (as we now call it) that we have just heard. ‘Surely he has borne our infirmities’, our griefs, yet ‘through him the will of the Lord shall prosper The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous Because he poured out himself in death ... and made intercession for transgressors’, for those who had not yet embraced the righteousness of self-giving.

The rabbis hear these words as referring to Moses, or as referring to the faithful after much of Israel is carted off into exile after the Babylonians destroy Jerusalem; and, of course, we Christians have long heard the words of the prophet as referring to Jesus himself.

And, as we have also just heard, the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says that, although Jesus fears suffering, he is obedient and ‘having been made perfect’ –having grown into his maturity—he becomes the High Priest making offering of himself and becoming ‘the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him’.

We know, we have long known, the summons, the importance, of self-sacrifice. The puzzled and innumerate sixth-grader (that would be me ...) is gratefully amazed for the generosity of the twelfth-grader –the daughter of his parents closest friends—who gives an evening of her time to explain, still once more, the concept of ‘the quantity’ in algebra. Someone with a cane cannot forget the person in a crowded train car who offers, even if unnecessary, ‘Please, take my seat’.

We tell stories about the Gentile men and women who in the 1930s and 40s said that they themselves were the Jews whom the Nazi regime sought in order to save the small children, their parents, hiding in the cupboard. We remember our own late nights in the Emergency Rooms, lying on a gurney with our parents, with our spouses, with those who love us faithfully at our sides.

Unless it is more expedient for the same purposes as those of James and John to mock their unworldly foolishness, we recall with grateful thanks those who protect, if needs be with their lives, their comrades in whatever sort of trenches they find themselves. Medals of Honor are among the tokens, however inadequate, of such gratitude.

You see, our readings today insist that the Glory of God is in self-sacrifice, and that its glorious throne is the Cross. In it and through it, the Kingdom that is coming unfolds, becomes known; and our invitation today, as always is to become part of the Kingdom that Jesus tries yet once more to describe to James, to John, and to all the rest of us. And so, for the Christ’s sake ... love. Serve. And bless. Amen.