Mark **10: 35 - 45**

In the verses just before our reading from Mark, Jesus gives his final and most detailed prediction of his trial, suffering, death, and resurrection. He is about to enter Jerusalem and confront the temple-based authorities.

So James and John seem to think this is an appropriate time, perhaps their last chance, to request privileged places for themselves to Jesus’ right and left.

In doing so, the sons of Zebedee appear to have misunderstood almost everything Jesus has said and done, except perhaps for the transfiguration. They recognised that glorification awaited Jesus. They expected that the authority Jesus had exhibited in his ministry would lead to something big, perhaps to a royal rule, and they wanted a special place in that.

When Jesus gently chastises them for their ignorance and speaks about “the cup” he must drink and “the baptism” he must undergo, he reiterates that violence and death await him in Jerusalem.

Although James and John affirm their willingness to endure suffering with Jesus, he waits until later to explain that they will fail to do so in the immediate future. Instead he addresses their desire for power and prestige. He comments on the nature of human power–the kind of power that will soon crush him in the political spectacle of his trial and execution–and on the meaning of his death. He puts his life and death, along with the lives and sufferings of his followers, in complete opposition to such expressions of power, the power which seemed more normal, even to his disciples.

James and John are not the only disciples enticed by visions of a triumphant reign, we hear that the rest of the Twelve fume over the brothers’ bid to outflank them in prominence. Jesus corrects their vision by holding up the behaviour of the Roman authorities as negative examples. They regularly “overpower” and “tyrannise” others. They rely on coercion and control to maintain their dominance and position.

In absolute contrast, greatness among Jesus’ followers is measured by their ability to live as servants and slaves, even if that life means suffering oppression at the hands of those who wield earthly power.

Jesus has spoken in similar terms, where he compares himself to a child, an image of powerlessness and vulnerability.

Jesus’ final line — “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” — connects to his preceding words about service and enslavement, indicating that his death will be just as much an example for them as was his way of living.

At the same time, Jesus’ mention of a “ransom” indicates that his death will be more than just an inspiring example or a martyr’s tragic protest against an unjust system.

The word used in Greek, *lytron* indicates that his death *does something*; it secures a release.

The context in which this statement appears is about power and servitude, not the problem of sin or the need to secure forgiveness.

Furthermore, the Old Testament usage of *lytron*, while sometimes referring to a redemption or purchased freedom, just as frequently refers to God’s acting to deliver people. A *lytron* is a liberation wrought by divine strength, not by payment such as the examples of *lytron* found in Exodus 6:6; Deuteronomy 15:15; 2 Samuel 7:23; Psalm 69:18; Isaiah 43:14.

Jesus therefore declares (without stopping to clarify precisely how) that God, through Jesus’ death, will free people from oppression and captivity, restoring them to membership in the community that corresponds to God’s reign.

All this to me raises some questions:

*From whom or what* does Jesus’ death deliver people? According to the immediate context, it delivers those who believe from the accepted norms of social and political power that human beings concoct to control each other. According to the story of the passion and resurrection, God defeats the power of death itself.

What about sin and forgiveness? The Gospel of Mark promises forgiveness. Repentance and forgiveness are part of Jesus’ proclamation and ministry. But Mark presents these topics as subordinate pieces in a more comprehensive apocalyptic showdown that sees the cosmos and human existence transformed by God’s reign and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Who benefits? The mention of Jesus as a ransom on behalf of *many* emphasises the contrast between *many* and *the one* who acts on their behalf. Here, “many” has the sense of “all” or “everyone,” which is in keeping with the cosmic scope of Mark’s apocalyptic drama.

The latter verses from Mark describe Jesus as a servant, an example which he instructs his disciples to follow. It could be assumed that Jesus acts as he does so we do not have to do so, but I do not believe that is how it is presented here.

The idea of a vicarious atonement — Jesus as a sinless sacrifice carrying the full burden of human sin to satisfy God or cosmic justice and therefore release us all from any responsibility is a nice thought, but I suggest not what it intended.

So what does it mean for the church, for congregations, and for individual Christians to imitate Jesus, who submits to the designs of his powerful enemies? And how do we, when and where we live, experience the realities of the liberation that God has accomplished for us through the death of Jesus Christ, and not through our own success or failure at adopting the role of a servant to others?

I’m not sure that I can give you an easy and adequate answer to

That question but Perhaps Kipling sums it up in his poem Mary’s

son.

If you stop to find out what your wages will be

And how they will clothe and feed you.

Willie, my son, don’t you go to the sea,

For the sea will never need you.

If you ask for the reason for every command,

And argue you with people about you,

Willie, my son, don’t you go on the land,

For the land will be better without you.

If you stop to consider the work that you’ve done,

And to boast what your labour is worth dear,

Angels may come for you, Willie my son

But you’ll never be wanted on earth dear.