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**Liturgy of the Word, Mark 10. 35-45, Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost, 17 October  
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Apprehending the Cross as a Recipe to Christian Discipleship

Mark 10: 35-45

by

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**The Collect**

Lord Jesus Christ  
you came among us as the servant of all;  
overturn our wrongful pride  
and make us eager to serve our brothers  
and sisters with loving self-sacrifice;  
for you live and reign with the Father  
and the Holy Spirit,

one God, for ever and ever.

Amen

Readings

Job 38: 1-7, (34-41)

Psalm 104:1-10, 35-36

Hebrews 5:1-10

Mark 10: 35-45

**Liturgy of the Word: Apprehending the cross as a recipe to Christian discipleship**

The going towards Jerusalem is beginning to get harder and difficult to embrace, at times puzzling and impossible to discern, that the disciples begin to sidestep and wonder what would their thrones look like at the realm of glory. At every step of the way, what the disciples have missed along with Jesus' teaching and ministry is the conviction that apprehending the reality of the cross is one of the recipes to the throne of glory. This conviction was epitomized by Jesus' disclosure of his identity at Caesarea Philippi. For Mark, what defines Christ and the nature of reign he has come to inaugurate is the inevitability of the cross as revealed in his messianic work and ministry. Following Mark, grasping the 'here and now of the cross' provides the clue to the realm of heaven, hence to the throne of glory. Hence, in Mark, the answer to what the future holds is hidden in the predicaments of the present marked by the experience of the cross as immanent in Jesus' work and teaching. Yet, again and again, what the disciples fail to understand is the fact that coming to terms with 'the here and now of the Christian gospel as framed in the reality of the cross will ultimately define and shape what the future holds and what the throne of glory will look like. The road to Jerusalem is riddled with fear and amazement pressing down on the disciples' conflicting emotions concerning their journey and the city of Jerusalem. Indeed, a story such as this may inspire both courage and fear even when followed accordingly. To get to the gist of the story it would be of interest to locate it into context by zooming back to the disciples themselves, on the road to Jerusalem, in Mark 10:32-34, where Mark shares that:

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them, and they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began

to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him, and after three days he will rise again (Mark 10:32-34).

This revelation triggered “James and John, the sons of Zebedee, to come forward to request for places of honour at Christ’s glory which in turn triggered Jesus’ prophetic reply to their request: “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” “And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them. “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.

### **The Cross as a Wellspring of Glory**

What are we to make of a Christ who reveals the reality of the cross in the realm of discipleship, in the disciples’ longing for glory? It is a painful reminder of being human to wish for an ease route where everything seems to precipitate towards selfless ends. We find it hard to accept that in our wishful quest, we may very well get what we wish but it may not be what we have longed for. For Mark, the disciples may very well land in Jerusalem, but what might happen beyond the walls of Jerusalem is not Christ to predict. Indeed, James and John, are wishing for something noble, to be granted places of safety and honour at the realm of glory, to be on the right and on the left of Jesus in his glory, but the outcome is not Christ to decide. What John and James are longing for, is, for Christ, a recipe for tragedy. Here the gospel reveals the risky side of discipleship translated in this old saying that - what we hope for, what we think we wish for, ends up not quite meeting our expectation – the means may not justify the end. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, request of Jesus to be seated next to him “in glory.” Jesus’ response brings to the fore the main topic that weaves together the whole gospel of Mark, the reality of the cross as a recipe to Christian discipleship. Jesus’ response is so difficult to embrace, it seems not to inspire much courage and enthusiasm, but it is here where the whole gospel of Mark leads into, to discern the cost of discipleship and the reality of the cross as a springboard of glory. Where the disciples see a banquet, a celebration of victory and power within the walls of Jerusalem, Jesus sees the cross, abandonment, and agony beyond the glorious walls of Jerusalem. Even as he marched towards Jerusalem, in his entire ministerial journey, Jesus always found himself prepared to face his own death, utterly lonely, despite his physical proximity to the disciples. In the face of tragedy, Jesus found himself alone, abandoned by those he called his dearest friends and followers. This is the gist of the gospel of Mark which the disciples, ourselves included, fail to apprehend. A gospel riddled with pain, torture, humiliation, and agony, as trajectories that lead to glory.

The gospel of Mark, by laying emphasis on the disciples’ fear, personal ambitions and lack of understanding, helps us to realise that a constant state of longing becomes that which deters our vision in coming to terms with the here and now of the human predicament. In the narrative, we find the disciples unable to grasp or understand the essence of Jesus’ teaching. For Mark, the disciples have misunderstood their calling and have not discerned the cost of discipleship. They seemed to think that their closeness to Jesus will result in higher status,

power, and authority instead of danger, suffering, shame, and humiliation.<sup>1</sup> What is clear to the readers of this story – but not clear to the disciples, who are part of Jesus on the journey – is that the disciples think they know who Jesus is and why he has come. But in reality, they fail to understand. And because of that, they do not know what it means to follow Jesus. But Jesus is, as he tells James and John after their request, a servant Messiah, who goes to the point of making himself a slave to be the servant of all. And to follow a servant Messiah means to be a servant to the core: “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:44-45).

The good news is that in spite of all uncertainties, drama, and tragedy that the story seems to precipitate about the realm of heaven, resurrection remains the wellspring that sets the tone of the kind of Messiah God wanted the people of Israel to know and embrace. The glimpse of the resurrection is the wellspring that points towards the realm of glory and triumph beyond the cross. Yet, even though for some of us, who live on this side of the resurrection, seem to hold the key of where this Messiah is leading into, we can only see, as Paul says, only in part, as in a mirror dimly.<sup>2</sup> Jesus continues to reveal himself as one who continuously offers his life as a ransom for many, revealing himself as a king who makes himself a slave and servant in order to transform and restore our humanity. Contrary to being a mighty king, with all the royal regalia, as the world expected, surprisingly Jesus emerges as a humble king, as one in solidarity with the excluded and reviled of society. In spite of the imminent threat to his life, Jesus differed radically from the expectations of his disciples. He exhibited courage and patience to fulfil his mission. He submitted himself to God’s purposes and turned to God as his one source of strength. Even in the face of fear and tragedy, Jesus obeyed and acknowledged God as the ultimate bestower of honour and glory.<sup>3</sup>

### **An Amazing and Transforming Grace**

In the gospel, we find the disciples unable to grasp or understand the essence of Jesus' teaching. Despite their lack of understanding, graciousness characterized Jesus' relationship to his disciples; it informed the transforming grace Jesus used to respond to their request. Jesus “did not consider the request of James and John presumptuous but taught them patiently what it means to demand to be close to him in glory. By casting himself in the role and vocation of a servant, he made it clear that as one moves further in discipleship, one is to expect more danger and more suffering.”<sup>4</sup> Despite this admonition, the disciples continued to follow Jesus. Their relationship to the master, though imperfect, did not break when their aspirations were denied.<sup>5</sup> Jesus however, responded to James and John by telling them, “The cup that I drink you will drink”, a prophecy which came true. History shows that James was the first martyr among the apostles, and John suffered over a long period of time for the sake of the gospel. The “failures of the disciples during Jesus’ lifetime were not the final word about their faithfulness. The foolish, lowly, inferior, and powerless disciples were transformed by God’s grace into holy, powerful, courageous, and saintly apostles.”<sup>6</sup> Again, as a congregation, lessons such as this may also help us to embrace our own uncertainties and failures as lessons to be learned that may end up stringing our resolve to be faithful followers of Jesus. The South African story of reconciliation and democracy might have been achieved

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<sup>1</sup> Nolan, Albert: *Jesus Today. A Spirituality of Radical Freedom*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 2006

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit., 2006

<sup>3</sup> Schwantes, Milton et al: *Springs of Living Water. Bible Studies on Grace and Transformation*. WCC Publications, Geneva 2005. P. 26

<sup>4</sup> Op. cit., p. 26

<sup>5</sup> Op. cit., p. 28

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit., p. 28

but its realization will remain an impossible possibility requiring courage and the willingness to be part of the journey despite every failure, betrayal and disappointment on the way.

The gospel of Mark helps us to realize that, without an informed faith, perpetual longing towards the future may prevent us from grasping the pragmatic, from grasping what we could come to terms with at present, in the here, and now. In the hesitation to come to terms with the present realities, we could end up being focused on the future that the meaning of here is overlooked, or even dismissed. Our dreams for a better future may often get the best of us, convincing us of a new beginning beyond the horizons of despair, a life free of that which causes the sadness and suffering we think can be overcome – usually by relying on our own. In the face of frustration and tragedy, we may try to insist on achieving our own glory rather than believing in Jesus' glory. Our longings may always pull us to reflect on how different our lives may actually be once we get there. There might be some hints along the way, about the reality of Christ we believe in but, given our wobbling expectations, they may be frequently ignored in favour of what the future holds. The wish may become so strong, the pull toward making the unattainable come to fruition may be so appealing that the truth and consequences, the actual that affects our lives, may get overridden. Like the ten disciples, we may ridicule as embarrassing what John and James might have done, but they have helped us to say what we cannot say, to see what we cannot see. Stories like this are just the mirrors we need to see our true selves – not always pleasant, but often necessary, especially so that we are then able to engage in some much deeper needed self-correction and self-interpretation.<sup>7</sup>  
Amen

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<sup>7</sup> Lewis, Karoline: Marbury E. Anderson Chair in Biblical Preaching, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota,