

Isaiah 53:4-12
Psalm 91:9-16
Hebrews 5:1-10
Mark 10:32-45

Sermon for Oct 17, 2021

THE COURAGE OF FAITH

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: Not my will, but thine.

A couple of weeks ago, we spoke briefly about the human nature of Jesus, what he must have been like as a person. The context of our reflection was one in which Jesus gathered some little children into his arms, and blessed them, and we reflected that Jesus must have been a kindly, approachable man, one to whom little children gravitated, whose presence they would have welcomed and in whose embrace they would have felt comfortable. When I pick up little children, they almost always begin to squirm and look around anxiously for their mother; but the Gospel accounts suggest that in Jesus, they intuited the presence of an enfolding patience and affection, and that speaks volumes about the kind of man Jesus must have been.

Reading between the lines in the same way, we learn that Jesus must have been a man who had what we might call the courage of faith.

The verses that open our gospel selection for today contain the third declaration to his disciples recorded by Mark of Jesus telling them about his own death. The first such declaration was in chapter 8; the second in chapter 9; and now this third one in chapter 10. Let's take a moment and read them in order.

Right after Peter's great confession that Jesus is the Messiah in chapter 8, we read:

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. (v. 31)

A little later, after the Transfiguration account, we find Jesus repeating his teaching of what was going to happen to him, and expanding on it to include the element of betrayal. In chapter 9, we read:

...He taught his disciples and said to them, "The son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And after he is killed, he will rise the third day. (v. 31)

And the third occasion is the one we find in today's reading. As we read it again, we notice how much more vivid and detailed this account is than the two that have gone before:

"Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him to the gentiles; and they will mock him, and scourge him, and spit on him, and kill him. And the third day he will rise again. (v 32)

It's almost as if the details of his own death became ever clearer and clearer in the mind of Jesus as he came closer both in space and time to his final destination. And I think that speaks eloquently to the courage he had as a human.

There are two kinds of courage. There's the courage that's a kind of instinctive reaction. A man sees a child fall into a raging creek, and immediately, almost reflexively, jumps in after; or a teacher throws herself in front of her students to shield them from an insane gunman. Many become heroes in the heat of the moment, and God bless them for that.

But there is also the kind of courage of a man or woman who sees the grim thing approaching far ahead, who has plenty of time to turn back, who could evade the issue, and who yet goes on. There is no doubt which is the higher courage; it is the courage that rests on the rock of a settled character, of facing the facts of life, however difficult they might be, and continuing to go forward. It is a settled courage, a courage that is the product of a lifetime of conscious and willful choices. It is the fruit of a cultivated life, rather than the product of a sudden reaction to a set of stressful circumstances.

That's the kind of courage Jesus possessed, and all of us have seen reflections of that kind of courage in people we've known. Working with hospice for many years now, I've seen wonderful examples of a Christ-like courage in people facing the same impending future that Jesus faced. I've seen people walking calmly and with resolution towards the same sort of difficult death towards which Jesus deliberately directed his own steps, approaching it openly and with calm assurance, rather than fear or evasion or bitterness. I've seen such people in our own congregation, even to this day, and they are truly examples of Christ's spirit living among us.

But immanent and approaching death is not the only stage on which the courage of Christ plays its part, and the rest of our Gospel reading for today clarifies for us in what Christian courage fundamentally consists.

Immediately following Jesus' third prediction of his own impending and terrible death, two of his disciples, James and John, obviously still not appreciating his words, ask Jesus if he will appoint them as chief administrators of his authority, once he acquires his absolute rulership over his earthly kingdom. It seems astonishing to us as we read the account that they could have been so dull; but we remember that a verse or two cannot begin to convey the rich reality of what must have been happening in their minds and their circumstances that led to such an inappropriate response. But be that as it may, rather than admonishing them for their misunderstanding, Jesus instead asks them a strange question.

Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?

Commentators typically interpret Jesus as asking them whether they are willing to undergo the suffering the Jesus is anticipating for himself, but that seems wrong to me. The two brothers have already indicated that they didn't understand or appreciate Jesus' prediction of his own terrible death, so that can't be what they're affirming here. Moreover, we know from history that John, at least, lived for many more decades, and there is nothing in the historical record to prove he died of anything other than old age.

So I don't think Jesus was asking them whether they were willing to suffer a terrible martyrdom. But then, what was he asking them?

In our passage, Jesus uses two images, the cup and baptism. What would those two images have signified in the minds of his disciples?

Among the Jews, it was the custom at a royal banquet for the king to hand the cup to his guests, and the poetic image of the cup, therefore, became one of accepting from the king whatever the king offered. "My cup runneth over," we read in the 23rd Psalm, where it refers to the life and experiences of happiness given by God. Isaiah speaks of Israel, because of their disobedience, having to drink the cup of God's wrath. And there are many other examples.

For the Jews, accepting the cup means accepting the experience, whatever it is, allotted to you by God.

And similarly for the image of baptism. The Greek word translated as 'baptism' literally means to be submerged, as someone might be submerged in debt, or submerged in sorrow, or submerged in love. As an image, it means to be overwhelmed and consumed by something.

When Jesus asked his disciples whether they were able to drink the cup he drinks and be submerged as he is submerged, he's asking whether they are able to accept the will and the life that God offers them, rather than staking their own claim on their lives.

Over and over in the Gospel accounts, Jesus makes it clear that his life is obedient to God's will. From the earliest report we have of Jesus, when as a boy he tells his parents, *I must be about my Father's business*, until his concluding words in Gethsemane, *Not my will, but thine*, Christ's entire human life is one of seeking and then accepting God's plan for his life.

Very few of us have the possibility of martyrdom in our future. The courage that Christ models for us on the way to the Cross is not the courage to face a horrible death, but rather the courage to accept the plan of God for our lives as our own. That courage is another name for faith. Few of us have martyrdom in our life plans, but we were all born at a certain time and a certain place, with certain relatives and certain abilities, certain opportunities and certain limitations. And of course, we do all face the inevitable conclusion of our earthly existence.

We've all met people who, in a sense, are at war with their own lives: and the result is always fear, disappointment, resentment, envy, and worse, especially as the end approaches. The reason is that their lives have been built on the sand of seeking their own will, first and foremost, rather than the rock of the acceptance of God's will.

But then as well, we've all met people who are at peace with their own lives, even as they approach the conclusion, because they've married their own lives to God's portion for them, including the ends of those lives. Sometimes we call them saints; sometimes we call them Mom.

The plan of God for Jesus's life included the Cross at its conclusion, and the marvelous peace of Christ – the peace that allowed him to take time on the way to the cross to stop and enjoy the company of little children; the peace that passes all understanding, is the promised spiritual reward we have when we accept God's allotted portion, when we accept the cup from God, and drink from it.

And so our prayer for this morning, heavenly father, is for the courage to trust in your love for us, to accept our lives with all their complications as your special and unique gift, and to seek and follow the path you have chosen for us, as our best and most beautiful path to heaven, because that's the path Jesus always chose, and we pray in his name.