

The Twenty-ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 53:10-11
<i>Response</i>	Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 33:4-5, 18-19, 20, 22
<i>Second Reading</i>	Hebrews 4:14-16
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The Son of Man came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 10:35-45

The Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time continues our journey through the Gospel of Mark with Jesus' famous statements about the Son of Man and his mission of suffering and dying for the sins of the many. So let's turn to Mark 10:35-45 and we'll look at what the gospel has to say today and what it might mean for us. So in verse 35 we have the famous story of James and John, these two brothers, the sons of Zebedee, coming to Jesus and asking him for a special place in the kingdom. This is what happens:

And James and John, the sons of Zeb'edee, came forward to him, and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What do 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 to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" And they said to him, "We are able." And 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." And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise au-

thority 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 the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”¹

Okay, let's pause there. What's going on in this gospel for today? Well the first thing you see here is the very frank and open ambition of two of the disciples, these two brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who you might recall were special among the 12 for a couple reasons. First, they were two of the first disciples that Jesus calls to be apostles. You recall, when he gets to Galilee he calls Peter and Andrew, two brothers who were fishermen, and he also calls James and John, who were fishermen sons with their father Zebedee. So they were special in the sense that they were selected early on in the process of gathering the disciples around him. They were also special because they belong to the inner circle of Peter, James and John, this triad of disciples who Jesus brings up the mountain of Transfiguration to witness his glory and his unveiling, who he also brings with him to eventually...he'll bring them with him to the Garden of Gethsemane to witness his agony and his passion in the garden. So in that case they are definitely special disciples and they ask Jesus for a special place in the kingdom. In fact, actually I love it, they ask before, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” So I love that question because it's fairly open ended, right. I can only imagine if I had a couple students come up to me and say, you know, Dr. Pitre we'd like you to do whatever we ask of you, without telling me what they're actually going to ask for. No teacher is going to say sure, you know, just tell me, whatever you want I'll do it, without knowing a little more specifically, exactly what it is. So you can kind of see them scheming here to try to, you know, bamboozle Jesus into giving them this position.

So he tolerates their ambitions and says well what do you want me to do, and they ask him to sit at his right hand and at his left hand in his glory, right. Now that's a technical term. You'll see it function as a kind of synonym for his kingdom. When he comes into his glory it will happen when he comes into his kingdom, right,

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

when he comes into the power and the glory of his kingship as Messiah. Recall, up to this point, although Jesus has revealed that he's Messiah in the Gospel of Mark, he's not exactly living like a king at this point, you know. He has no place to lay his head, he's humble, they have no possessions, they're wondering about the countryside. He doesn't look like a king just yet and so the apostles here are basically saying when you come into the power and the glory of your kingdom we would like the positions of greatest authority. To sit at the right hand of the king or to sit at the left hand of the king is a symbol for having the greatest authority or office in the kingdom. You can think here for example in the Book of Kings 1-2; it describes in 1 Kings 1 how Bathsheba as Queen Mother sits at the right hand of King Solomon because she's second in rank in the kingdom to the king himself. So this is a pretty ambitious request on the part of James and John to sit at his right and left hand, and Jesus responds here with a little bit of a riddle when he says to them, "you don't know what you're asking."

Now sit with that for just a second. What does he mean, you don't know what you're asking? Well on the one hand you might think, well he just means, you know, you're being too ambitious or you don't really understand what the kingdom is going to be like. That's partially true, but within the context of Mark's gospel it's fascinating here that he goes on to use these two images of a cup and a baptism, right. So he says, "You don't know what you're asking. Can you drink the cup that I drink, and can you be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" Now both of these are obviously symbols for something, and if you keep reading in the gospel you'll understand that Jesus will use the cup and the baptism in Gethsemane, where James and John are present, to describe his passion and his death, his crucifixion on the cross. So he's going to drink the cup of suffering in his Passover and his suffering and death on the cross and he's going to be baptized, meaning he's going to be immersed in the waters of suffering in his passion and his death. Which you might think, well, that's kind of a weird image for dying, but not if you've ever almost drowned, which I have on a couple of occasions tubing on rivers and whatnot. If you get caught in a strong current and you are immersed, *baptismo*, in the water it's not very long before you can die. It's real easy to die by drowning and so you'll see — in the Psalms too in the Old Testament — the image of being overrun with waves as a metaphor for suffering to the extent of dying, right, or being overwhelmed by suffering and death. Water, it gives life, but it's

also very deadly. So in the image here Jesus is taking drinking the cup of suffering and using the image to be immersed in water as an image for his passion, his suffering, and his death. So what he's saying to the disciples is, in effect, you really don't know what you're asking because if you want to sit at my right and my left hand in my kingdom then you have to suffer like I'm going to suffer. You have to undergo death like I'm going to undergo death. That is the way you are exalted to the glory that I will receive, to which I will be exalted in the death and resurrection.

So he says here something fascinating, he says, "to sit at my right hand and my left hand is not mine to grant, but is for those for whom it has been prepared." What does that mean? Well on the one hand you could take it to mean that there's some other people who are going to have higher places in the kingdom of God than James and John, and that's probably true on one level. I mentioned the Queen Mother just a moment ago, well Mary as the mother of Jesus has and would've had in Israelite society the status of Queen Mother. There's a real sense in which after Jesus the person of highest rank in the kingdom of God is Our Lady, is the Blessed Mother. She's the queen of the kingdom of heaven and therefore she sits at the right hand of Christ in a way that is exalted above all of the other disciples. She has a unique position, so that's true theologically, but I think in the context of Mark's gospel there's something else going on here too. If you fast-forward again to the passion, not only does Jesus drink a cup and be baptized with suffering in the agony of the garden, but in the account of the crucifixion the two criminals are crucified at his right hand and at his left hand, right, and you see that language gets used in Matthew and it gets used in Mark to describe the position that the two thieves take in the crucifixion. So there's another possible interpretation here which I find really plausible frankly, which is that effectively what John and James are actually asking for is to be martyred with Jesus. If they want to sit at his right and his left hand in his glory, his real glory is going to be the glory of the cross, it's going to be the glory of his crucifixion, it's going to be the glory of his suffering and his death through which he saves the world. So if they want to sit at his right and his left hand, what they're effectively asking to do is to climb up on the crosses that will be raised along side of him, to take the position of the two thieves, who were nailed to the tree, who have their legs crushed and who were executed and asphyxiated to death while Jesus reigns from the wood of the cross, and their posi-

tions are part of God's providence, right? They were, in a sense, appointed by God. It's not for James and John to take that position. That's not going to be their fate. They're not going to die with Jesus on Calvary. That was for someone else to sit at his right and left hand in the passion.

However, if you look, Jesus does say something interesting. He says, "The cup I drink you will drink; and the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized." So he does foretell that James and John are going to suffer and die, right, or at least suffer. If you fast-forward a little bit in the New Testament and you actually look at the rest of the Bible, James the son of Zebedee, the brother of John, is the first of the 12 apostles to be martyred after Stephen is martyred. So Stephen is martyred in Acts 7, and in Acts 12, James, the son of Zebedee, is killed by King Herod with a sword. So he does drink the cup and he is baptized with the martyrdom of Christ, but he doesn't die with Jesus on Calvary. With regard to John, the beloved disciple, John, the son of Zebedee, there's some conflict in the tradition about whether he's martyred or not. Some of the church fathers say he was martyred, others say he died at an old age. Most say he died at an old age without martyrdom, that's the majority tradition. Others say they attempted to martyr him but he wouldn't die. So there's kind of some debate about exactly the fate of John, the son of Zebedee. But James did in fact drink the cup and he was baptized with the baptism of martyrdom. So Christ's words eventually do come true especially with reference to James, but neither one of them dies with Jesus in the passion on Calvary. So that's kind of the explanation of the situation.

Now with all that said, what happens is the other 10 apostles wise up and they hear what James and John have been plotting and scheming behind their backs, because that's effectively what they've done, right. They've gone behind the backs of the 10 and tried to secure their places in the kingdom. You can imagine, perhaps Peter is particularly perturbed with them trying to pull this off because he has been singled out as leader of the 12 on multiple occasions, not just in this gospel but elsewhere in the Gospels of Matthew and John and whatnot. So the 10 it says were indignant at James and John. So they get upset with them and Jesus calls the 12 to him and he uses their anger at James and John as an opportunity to teach them about the nature of the kingdom and the kind of leadership that he actually exercises. What he says there is that the kingdom of God is not like the pagan kingdoms

of the world, right. It's important to remember this. We say kingdom of God, it's *basileia* in Greek, the Greek word for kingdom, but *basileia* is the same word for empire. So when you talk about the Roman Empire, you're talking about the Roman *basileia*, you're talking about the Roman Kingdom, okay. So Jesus here is pointing to the kings of the Gentiles, the kingdoms of the Gentiles, he means the empires of the world. The way empires rule is through power, force of arms, as he said, "the Gentiles lord it over them, their great men exercise authority over them. But it will not be so among you; but whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, whoever would be first must be your slave."

Alright, so what's he getting at there? Well he's saying Gentile kings are like masters to slaves. They have complete dominion, complete dominance over their subjects and they happily exercise it, they lord it over them. That's not how you're going to lead. That's not the kind of kingdom I'm coming to bring, right. If you want to be great among the 12 and among the kingdom I'm making then you need to be the servant of all and the slave of all. Now those are two different words in Greek. Servant, the word for servant is *diakonos*, we get the word deacon from that. It means an attendant or a minister of any sort, so anyone who assists or ministers to someone else can be called a *diakonos*. It can have a cultic connotation like in a temple setting, but it can also have just a kind of civic or domestic connotation. Anyone who attends to someone who's above them, right, that's a *diakonos*. *Doulos*, the other word, slave, means just that, it's a slave. Sometimes it's translated as a servant but it means like a slave in a household or in a royal home, a royal household or whatnot.

So what Jesus is saying is if you want to be first in my kingdom you need to be like an attendant and like a slave to everyone else. So Jesus is the original teacher of what has come to popularly be called servant leadership. You've probably heard that term bandied around today in business circles, about how a good leader doesn't lord it over everyone over whom he has authority, but actually acts as a servant to those whom he or she has been placed above in a position of authority. Any parent who's a good parent knows what this means. Your children, you have authority over your children, but you're really there to serve them and to minister to them, attend to their needs and help them grow into good and productive healthy adults, not to lord it over them or be abusive toward them of course. In any case, so Jesus

is basically trying to take the disciples understanding of leadership and flip it upside down. He's trying to take their understanding of a kingdom and flip it upside down so they can look at it through the lens of what it really means to lead and what it really means to be a king, which is to be the servant of all.

Before I move on, just one quick note here as an aside. It's kind of interesting that most of us, when we think about Jesus with reference to the sacraments, we, you know, will talk about Jesus as the high priest, and he certainly is a priest. And Jesus, at the same time though, you can also speak about Jesus the deacon. Alright, we don't think of him that way usually, but here he actually uses the term *diakonos* to refer to himself. Like he is the deacon par excellence because he is the minister par excellence, he's the servant par excellence, he's the one who puts others before himself. So Christ the deacon is being revealed here in Mark 10. I think that's kind of neat and interesting, especially for all you deacons out there to think about your ministries of participation in Christ's own servant ministry, his servant leadership, his attending to others needs before his own.

With that said, we come to Mark 10:45, which, if I'm not mistaken, in its Markan version, or it's Matthian version, Matthew 20:28, the statement of the Son of Man coming not to be served but to serve is the most frequently quoted verse in the documents in the Second Vatican Council. It's kind of interesting, it quotes over and over again this image of Christ as a servant Messiah, as the suffering Messiah. So he says the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. So two things, first, the verb being used here in that expression is actually *diakoneō*. It means to be a deacon or to be a minister in attendance. So the Son of Man didn't come to be attended to. He came to act as a deacon, to act as a servant, to act as a minister to others, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Okay, there's so much we can talk about. I wrote my dissertation in part on Mark 10:45, so about a 100 page chapter on this, so there's a lot we could say. For our purposes here I just would want to point out two things. First, the image of a ransom is the image of a payment that is given to set someone free, whether from slavery or prison or some kind of bondage. That's the basic meaning of *lutron*, the image of a ransom. In the Old Testament it frequently gets used with reference to the exodus. So what does God do? He ransoms Israel from slavery to Pharaoh and leads them home to the promised land in the exodus. So ransom is like an exodus

image, it's an exodus term. So Jesus is going to ransom humanity from slavery, not from slavery to Pharaoh but from slavery to sin and death. So he's going to come as Son of Man not to lord over people but to inaugurate a new Exodus in which his kingship is going to be the opposite of Pharaoh's kingship, it's going to be a servant king. Then the second aspect of it is that he's going to serve by dying. He's going to serve by giving his life as a ransom, not money as a ransom, but the price of his blood. That image is really important because it too is an allusion to the Old Testament. It's an allusion to Isaiah 53 and the prophecy of the suffering servant, which just happens to be the first Old Testament reading for today.

So let's go back to the Old Testament reading, Isaiah 53. In this case the church just gives us a very brief section. The whole chapter is this prophecy of the suffering servant who offers his life as a ransom for many and sets the multitude free from sin, but the church just gives us two verses so I'll read those two verses to you, it's verse 10 and 11. Regarding the suffering servant it says this:

Yet it was the will of the LORD to bruise him; he has put him to grief;
when he makes himself an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, he
shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand;
he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied; by his knowl-
edge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted right-
eous; and he shall bear their iniquities.

So notice a couple of elements there in the prophecy, the figure of the servant of the Lord. What's he going to do? He's going to die. He's going to make his life a sin offering which is one of the offerings that was given in the Temple to atone. So you think about the day of atonement, the goat that was sacrificed, was a sin offering on behalf of the people; the bull that was sacrificed by the high priest was a sin offering on behalf of the priest that was meant to take away, to atone for, sins. But in this case, it's not the animal that's going to die for the sins of the people, it's the suffering servant of God. And notice it says that this servant, through his death, is going to make many to be righteous. Now that's a really very important term because it's a kind of technical term that signals Jesus is alluding to this passage. When he says the suffering Son of Man is going to die for many, to ransom many, the reason he uses the word many is he's alluding to the terminology of Isaiah 53.

The servant who dies for “the many,” in Hebrew *rabbim*, the *rabbim*, the multitude, right. Now why does that matter for us? Well it's important because some people will sometimes say well the Jews didn't have any idea of a suffering and dying Messiah, this was completely unprecedented. Actually, that's not totally correct because to the extent that the servant in Isaiah is a Messianic figure than what we clearly have here is a prophecy of his suffering and death, and not just his death but an atoning death that acts as a sacrifice for sin, through which he will take upon himself the iniquities of the multitude in order to set them free in a new exodus.

Now the question that frequently raises for people though is well, wait, does that mean that Jesus didn't die for everyone? Because a lot of time people see the word many and they'll assume well he didn't die for all he just died for many, and this assumption was kind of exacerbated by the changes in the translation of the mass in English that took place a few years back now. You might recall that in the older English translation of the mass that was in use from 1970 up until 2008-ish or so, I can't remember the exact date, it said in the liturgy that Christ died for you and for all, right. But the original Latin didn't actually say for all, it said for you and for many. So in the new translation of the mass it was changed to reflect the Latin more literally, for you and for many, and on the Internet there was all this hulla-baloo that kind of broke out, you know, saying that the church used to teach Jesus died for all but now it teaches he just dies for some because of the change of the word from all to many. Some people were in an uproar about it, and it's a little frustrating for me because I was like okay, no, that's in the Bible, right, like go to the Last Supper, go to Mark 10:45, Jesus himself says he offers his life for many. There's nothing wrong with saying that, that's his own words. The question is, what does he mean by it? And the way you get at that is by putting the words in context. And in this case, although you can't see it in the lectionary, it's very clear that in Isaiah 53, which is what Jesus is quoting, when Isaiah says the servant dies for many he doesn't mean many, as in not all, he means a multitude, that he dies for a multitude, right. And a multitude is a neutral term. There are a multitude of souls that have been created since the beginning of time and all the way to the end of time; that is a multitude of people. So you can use the word many in an exclusive or a nonexclusive way, you can use it restrictively or non-restrictively. Isaiah is clearly using it non-restrictively to refer to everyone because if you back up before he says the term many, in verses five and six, it says this about the servant:

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

So notice that, before Isaiah uses the image of the multitude of the many he stresses three times that the servant dies for all, not just for some but for all. So when Isaiah says the servant offers his life as a ransom for the multitude or for many, he doesn't mean many, as in not all, he just means everyone, right, but many emphasizes the number of souls for which he's dying. The same thing is true about the gospel. When Jesus comes to the Last Supper and he says this is the blood of the covenant poured out for many, he doesn't mean just for some and not all, he means for all. The same thing is true in the mass, the word many means everyone. However, with that said Pope Benedict has pointed out at the same time it's helpful for us to remember that the term many means that Jesus offers his life for every single soul, but that doesn't imply that every single soul is going to respond to the grace and respond to the ransom and accept the forgiveness that Christ offers through his passion, death, and resurrection. We still have to respond to that grace. So there's an urgency to the invitation for us to receive that which was given on our behalf.

Okay, so with that said the Responsorial Psalm for today is Psalm 33, the Lord delivers the faithful from death, that's kind of the refrain. If you look at verse 19 it just says that:

Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,
that he may deliver their soul from death,
and keep them alive in famine.

So the reason that Psalm is chosen is for the thematic link of the identity of God as a deliverer, that God doesn't leave us enslaved to sin. He doesn't leave us in bondage to our iniquity, he comes into the world to save us. He comes into the

world to deliver us. He comes into the world to set us free, and he does this above all through the passion, death and resurrection of Christ.

So with that in mind, I'd just like to close with an insight from the living tradition on this whole question of Christ's death for some or for all and the power of his atonement. I think this is an important teaching to highlight from the Catechism for a couple reasons. First, the idea that Jesus is just like a good teacher or great prophet or a world leader of a religion has become much more widespread in our day and time, a kind of pluralistic context where we have this tendency to look at all religions as created equal and that can mislead us about the unique character of Christianity, and in particular about the radical nature of the claim that we're making in Christianity. When we say that the death of Jesus of Nazareth atones for all the sins of all humanity from the beginning of time to the end of time, that's a big claim. It is virtually an infinite claim, in a sense, I mean not actually infinite, but it borders on that because it's literally incalculable for us to try to estimate the gravity and the number of all of the sins ever committed by any individual throughout human history, by every person. We can't wrap our brains around that, and yet we claim as Catholics that Jesus dies and atones for all those sins. You can't make that claim about a regular human being, about just an ordinary human being, right. There were lots of Jews for example, lots of prophets, who were tortured and killed over the course of Israel's history, right. No one ever acclaimed that any of their deaths made up for the sins of all humanity. The reason we can claim that about Jesus is because of the truth of his incarnation, the truth of his divine identity, the truth of his divinity, and so two paragraphs from the Catechism. The first, paragraph 605, are relevant to this, it says this:

He affirms that he came "to give his life as a ransom for many" [Mark 10:45]; *this last term is not restrictive*, but contrasts the whole of humanity with the unique person of the redeemer who hands himself over to save us.

So you see there the Catechism is saying what I'm saying, or I mean I'm saying what the Catechism is saying. Namely, that the use of the term many is not restrictive, it encompasses all of humanity, and the church emphasizes that in the next statement, it says:

*The Church, following the apostles, teaches that Christ died for all men without exception: “There is not, never has been, and never will be a single human being for whom Christ did not suffer.”*²

That’s from the Council of Quiercy there, Catechism 605. That's a big claim that we’re making, Christ died for all. He died for every human being, every single person who has ever lived on this planet or whoever will live on this planet. That is the teaching of the church following the apostles. So Christianity teaches a message of universal salvation in the sense that there is the potential for every single human being to be redeemed by the blood of Christ. That’s how powerful his blood is, that’s how valuable the cross is, that’s the price that he paid on Calvary, that’s the inestimable value of the ransom of the Son of Man. How is that possible though? How can we say that about Jesus? Well paragraph 616 in the Catechism gives us the answer and I’ll close with this, I love this paragraph, it’s so beautiful. It says this:

It is love “to the end” that confers on Christ’s sacrifice its value as redemption and reparation, as atonement and satisfaction. He knew and loved us all when he offered his life.

And it goes on to say:

*No man, not even the holiest, was ever able to take on himself the sins of all men and offer himself as a sacrifice for all. The existence in Christ of the divine person of the Son, who at once surpasses and embraces all human persons and constitutes himself as the Head of all mankind, makes possible his redemptive sacrifice for all.*³

The last two words are italicized, for all. So what's the Catechism saying there? The only reason Christians can claim that Jesus’ death on Calvary atones for the sins of all humanity is because Christians also know that Jesus was God, that Jesus was the eternal son of God made man taking upon himself the sins of the whole

² CCC 605

³ CCC 616, quoting the Council of Quiercy

world, because as Peter says elsewhere, if love covers a multitude of sins, if human love covers a multitude of sins, then divine love, infinite divine love, covers an infinite multitude of sins. We cannot outdo the love of Christ. We cannot overcome the infinite value of the ransom of Jesus Christ on the cross, and I just think that's really important for us to stress in these days, because in my years of studying at the academy, I met a lot of people who think Jesus is a great guy or maybe even think he's a prophet, or even maybe the Messiah, but they have a hard time swallowing the mystery of the Incarnation. And every single time I met a person who doesn't believe Jesus is fully God, invariably they also don't believe that the cross is an atoning act. They don't believe in the atonement, they don't believe in the idea, in the truth, that Jesus dies for the sins of all humanity, and what they end up inevitably doing is coming up with some other solution to the problems that humanity faces. The solution gets shifted away from the cross, because once the cross is just one more death of one more Jew by the Roman Empire, it loses its divine power and its efficacy to take care of your sins and my sin, to atone for your sins, my sin and the sins of all the world. It becomes a tragedy and not the mechanism of redemption for the whole human race. So you see here how the mystery of the cross and the mystery of the Incarnation are intricately bound up with one another. That's what the apostles hadn't learned, and that's what Jesus was trying to teach them when he uttered those solemn words "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."