

I love this middle section of Mark's gospel from which comes our gospel reading for today. Starting back in chapter 8 of Mark, Jesus queries his disciples on who it is that they think he is. He's at the stage of his journey where he is just about to turn his face toward Jerusalem and he knows what fate awaits him there. In asking his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?", what he's trying to ascertain is whether they "get it", whether they understand all that he has been preaching and practicing. To make it crystal clear to them, lest they miss the point, three times he predicts his passion to them, each time getting more and more graphic about just what kind of suffering and humiliation await him at the end of this road. Despite this, his disciples don't, in fact, really get it. Today's gospel demonstrates one of those occasions.

When earlier in this section Peter proclaims Jesus Messiah, he's proclaiming Jesus as the next David, a new warrior-king sent to chase out the Romans, return the people to the ways of God, and set up his own rule over Israel. That was the hope for a Messiah that many loyal Jews held. And this concept of Messiah was cultivated even amongst his own disciples, regardless of Jesus's own announcement of the suffering and death that awaited him.

So when James and John come to Jesus asking to "sit at his left and right hand" when he comes in glory, this was no act of sacrifice on their part; on the contrary, it was pure self-aggrandizement. They were jockeying for positions in the "presidential cabinet" they believed Jesus would set up once they routed the Romans and retook Jerusalem. They were aiming for vice-president and secretary of state in a sense. That's why the other disciples were so "indignant" at them—both angry at the naked lobbying for positions of power and probably upset that they hadn't asked first.

Jesus tries to turn their eyes back to the image of the "suffering servant" we hear in the first reading, another attempt to get it through their thick heads that his "Messiah-ship" has more in common with that suffering servant than with David's warrior-king. Their own discipleship should bear that in mind: that the only kind of power worth anything in Jesus's reign is the power to serve others.

It's a conundrum which most of the Church in the Global North—like here in the U.S.—are still mystified by. The desire to sit at Jesus's right and left hands means to court and endure the suffering that comes with taking on those who wield political, economic, religious and cultural power; and the only legitimate authority within our Church is found in the exercise of service and the giving of one's life for our sisters and brothers.

*~ Johnny Zokovitch*