

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, May 30th 2018

In Mark this episode follows the disappointing encounter with the rich young man, the warning about riches and the rewards of renunciation. No wonder those who followed were afraid. They were beginning to wonder about what Dietrich Bonhöffer would later call “the cost of discipleship” and it is precisely at this junction that Jesus makes the third prediction of his passion and death. Against this ominous background comes the almost unthinkable request in the context of that prediction: when you become President, could we be your two vice-presidents? It is not just a matter of ambition, of being great, it has to do with being greater than the others.

And yet these two, like the rest of the followers, were deep down good people. They had left everything to follow Jesus. In yesterday’s gospel reading Peter had said to Jesus: we have left everything to follow you. Well, everything... but themselves. The self is something we always carry with us, even after we accept the Lord’s invitation to follow him, and it is from this self that such discordant attitudes come.

Still Jesus’ response is not the harsh reproach we might have expected, as he does correct them rather gently: you do not really know what you are asking for. He then disabuses them regarding their expectations: can you pay “the cost of discipleship”? The almost bragging reply from the two brothers amounts to: of course, we can. There is a touch of cockiness in that bragging, a risk we all run at any moment of consolation.

Jesus straightens them up: You will certainly pay “the cost of discipleship,” but not as a ticket to power, rather as a ticket to credibility. The apostles gained credibility by drinking of that chalice and James, one of the two, was the first to drink of it in martyrdom.

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