

THE EMMAUS SERIES

29th Sunday Year B

Isaiah 53:10-11

Hebrews 4:14-16

Mark 10:35-45

The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve

In Mark's telling of the story of his final journey to Jerusalem, Jesus three times warns the twelve of the fate that will overtake him in the Holy City. During this time, Jesus must have reflected frequently upon the Servant Songs of the Isaian writings, and their paradoxical anticipation of the way in which God would fulfil the hopes of Israel. Our first reading is a brief excerpt from the greatest of these Songs. The Servant who will bring to realisation the true destiny of Israel will know great 'suffering ... offering his life as an atonement'; he will take the 'faults' of the people 'upon himself'. But by doing so he will turn the nation's failure into God's final triumph, as he achieves 'what the Lord wishes'. 'By his suffering my servant shall justify many'.

With these things in his mind, Jesus has to contend with the naïve ambitions of James and John – and with the indignation of the 'other ten', resentful that the sons of Zebedee have tried to steal a march on them. Given the context we have described, it comes as no surprise that the response of Jesus refers to the ordeal that lies ahead of them. 'You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink with me the cup of suffering, share in the ordeal in which I am soon to be plunged?'

Our Christian language often speaks of 'conversion'. The incident we are considering points to the fact that true conversion is much more than a reform of personal morals. It is a revolution in our understanding of what our life 'in Christ' means; it is the starting point of true discipleship. Jesus now urges the twelve to be converted, to broaden their vision, change their values – by identifying with the paradoxical ways of God that are the subject of his reflections as he journeys to Jerusalem. If they are to be leaders and guides in the community of disciples, their exercise in authority must be more than the realisation of their ambitions for a place of prestige and power. If they want to be truly great, they must make themselves 'servants' – even 'slaves' – of all.

Jesus will teach us, not merely by his words, but also by the living witness of his example: 'For the Son of Man himself did not come to be served but to serve' – words that sum up the whole tenor of his life. The reading from Hebrews reminds us how truly he lowered himself to share our life: 'feeling our weaknesses with us ... tempted in every way that we are, though without sin'. These are amazing words; truly, God's Servant is also our brother. This reading introduces the great theme of Hebrews, Jesus 'the supreme high priest who has gone through to the highest heaven'. This theme will interpret the saving mission of Jesus to Jewish converts – for whom the temple observances meant so much – by a comparison with the role of the priests in temple worship.

We live in the time of fulfilment. The Spirit of Christ has been given to the Church; and great heroes down through the ages have followed Christ's example, making themselves servants of all. Genuine renewal is linked with such a conversion to God's ways making the Church a sign of hope in a world without hope, a true foreshadowing of the final Kingdom in which God's ways will shape all things.

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