

**Service of the Word.**

**Readings:**

Isaiah 53:4-12

Psalm 91:9-16

Hebrews 5:1-10

Mark 10:32-45

**Sermon:**

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)

Looking at the gospel reading as we had it today, I see three parts in the text. Actually I asked Evans to read a bit more than the Lectionary pointed out. The first three verses you heard were extra: Jesus foretelling what was to happen to him: In Jerusalem he would be handed over to the leadership, who would condemn him to death and hand him over to the gentiles to be tortured and killed. He also mentions that he will rise again after three days. That is the first part of the text, the verses 32 to 34 if you want to follow it in your bibles or on the screen.

The second part is the request of James and John and Jesus' reaction to that, the verses 35 to 40.

The third part is the reaction of the other disciples and the way Jesus deals with that, the verses 41 to 45.

What happens in the first part? Jesus and his followers are on their way to Jerusalem. The followers, including the twelve apostles are amazed and afraid according to the text. They feel the tension building up the closer they get to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was dangerous territory for Jesus. He had been threatened there before. The priests and the scribes see him as a threat to their position, both in religious and political aspects; they want to get rid of him.

And then Jesus calls the twelve to the side and explains to them what is to happen to him, not for the first time, actually for the third time already. The Son of Man is to be arrested, tortured and killed. But on the third day he will rise again. Jesus is making it very clear and he explained it more than once but it looks as if the apostles don't get the message, at least not the whole message. They don't get the message of the suffering Messiah, although that idea was well known in the Old Testament as we heard today in Isaiah's story about 'The Suffering Servant'. They hang on to the idea of the Messiah coming

in glory, restoring the throne of David and overpowering all enemies. The apostles apparently only hear the last bit of what Jesus is telling them: he will rise in glory.

That brings us to the second part of the text. James and John ask Jesus for places of honour and influence 'in his glory'. They both have been witnesses of Jesus' transfiguration on Mount Tabor, they have seen him in his glory, and now they want their share in that glory. But Jesus explains to them that glory like that comes at a price. He answers them: You don't realize what you are asking! Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with? Jesus refers to his suffering and death on the cross. He will be baptised with, he will be immersed in suffering. His glory will be the glory of his death on the cross, with criminals on either side. And only after this happening, his glory will be completed in his resurrection after three days. So he asks James and John whether they are up for it. And they say 'yes'. We all know that both James and John, together with the rest of the apostles will run away as soon as Jesus gets arrested. It is not so easy to put your money where your mouth is when life itself hangs in the balance. Jesus tells James and John that they will get their share of suffering. We know that later James was beheaded by King Herod in the year 44; John was most likely exiled and imprisoned for a long time. So they do get to drink from the cup that Jesus was drinking from.

At the end of this second piece of text, in verse 40, Jesus explains to them that it is not up to him who sits on his right- or left-hand site in the Kingdom of God. Jesus does not glorify himself. His glory comes from the Father. His Father is putting the world in order. It is the Father's Kingdom, as we pray in the Lord's Prayer: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your Kingdom come, your will be done'.

Strangely enough, when James and John ask for a preferred treatment, Jesus does not rebuke them for being selfish. He does not tell them off; he warns them for what they are asking, he explains them how the Kingdom of God will come into being. He tells them what suffering is involved in that. The other ten apostles respond in a different way: they get angry with James and John!

That brings us to the third part of the text.

The other apostles get angry with James and John over their selfish behaviour. I guess they were all after that preferred position 'in Jesus' glory'. But again Jesus steps in and makes clear that his glory in the Kingdom of God is nothing like any kingdom on earth. On earth rulers or leaders lord it over their subjects, they exalt themselves, play boss, use or abuse power; they even turn into tyrants. To be in a leading position in the Kingdom of God doesn't look anything like that. Among Jesus followers, in the Kingdom of God, it will be like this, according to Jesus: 'whoever wishes to become great among you, must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be the first among you, must be slave of all.'

So there are two aspects to Jesus' teaching here:

First of all: to be part of God's Kingdom you have to be prepared to suffer. The Kingdom will be beautiful, beyond our imagination! But the path leading there can be narrow and full of obstacles. We have to be prepared to struggle and go against a hostile world.

The second aspect is about the way to do it: we don't lord it over our people; we must be servants, we must be slave of all. Strong language in a time in which slavery was still common. But Jesus means it. Not long after this story, at his last supper, he will take of his outer garment and put a towel around his waist to wash his disciples' feet. That was a task normally performed by the lowest slave. Jesus makes his disciples clear what he means: 'the Son of man came not to be served but to serve'.

That's what we take away from this text today: are we prepared to suffer? Are we prepared to struggle for the Kingdom. How far are we prepared to go?

And: Do we realise what it means to be 'slave of all'?

Jesus is 'the suffering servant'. We are followers of Jesus, that means being suffering servants. Are we?

Amen.