

“Are you able to drink the cup...?”

Matthew 20:17-28

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Introduction: This past week we quietly transitioned into what’s traditionally known as Lent, the 40 days prior to Jesus’ passion, although for some the transition may not have been so quiet, as it was preceded by several days of raucous indulgence and merrymaking (which is the popular sense of Carnival), just before settling down to the fasting and austerity of Lent (at least, in the Catholic sense). In fact, the weekend before Lent, a fellow professor from the seminary and I were flying to Tenerife for theology and New Testament classes, and the crew of our flight just assumed that all of us aboard were headed to Carnival celebrations there (“*carnavaleros*” they called us). And we certainly got to see some quite extraordinary costumes during the weekend (but nothing as flamboyant as in Brazil).

So in our Scripture passage today we are in that same time period just prior to Jesus’ passion. And since the context is so important to our passage, I’d like to review it carefully before we look at our text. It focuses on His ministry in Perea and Judea as He makes His way toward Jerusalem – for the last time (Mt. 19-20). In chp. 19 Jesus is first confronted by the Pharisees, as usual, trying to test Him, hoping to catch Him in His words, and the specific issue is marriage and divorce (quite a thorny subject), but whatever we do in this area, as Jesus clarifies in v. 12, it should be **for the sake of the Kingdom!** (I.e, let Kingdom priorities illuminate your marriage or singleness, and your problems and struggles on either side of that line!) His next confrontation is with the disciples themselves, and the issue is over children and their place in the Kingdom. Jesus insists that **“of such is the Kingdom of heaven, so don’t put hindrances between them and me!”** (The first application of this saying is directed to the church, but in second place, it certainly applies to parents as well, and on a third level to their educators.) Starting in v. 19, the encounter is with a “rich young ruler,” and the subject focuses on possessions and eternal life; but as the young man departs, Jesus explains his problem also in terms of the Kingdom – how material things can be such an impediment to the Kingdom. And Jesus finishes off that conversation with a promise to the disciples in regard to following Him and the Kingdom results in their lives. Immediately afterward Jesus tells them a parable of the Kingdom, probably not one of their favorites (or yours?), because it suggests that those who come into the Kingdom last will receive the same reward as those who come in first – a fascinating teaching surely intended to pique the disciples’ sense of justice. After that, we have what we might call the immediate context of our passage for today: Jesus third announcement of His passion. He doesn’t try to explain its connection with the Kingdom, but it has everything to do with completing the work of establishing the Kingdom. So following all this intensive teaching on the Kingdom, we have the incident of today’s text: James and John come with their petition ... and their mother! So the question we want to ask as we listen in, is what’s the **pattern of this Kingdom?**

1) James and John had an interesting relationship with their Teacher and Lord. Their mother and His were most likely sisters as evidenced in these parallel passages: Mt. 27:56, mother of the sons of Zebedee = Mk. 15:40, Salome = Jn. 19:25, Jesus’ mother’s sister. This made James and John Jesus’ first cousins, and their mother, His aunt. How would we have felt, if we’d been among those disciples, as we realize these “colleagues” are attempting to control outcomes by leveraging their “advantage”: their mother, who as Jesus’ aunt could surely wield a certain influence over Him to help them further

their ambitions? Or were they just putting themselves at Jesus' disposal? It really feels unfair, doesn't it? Nepotism? None of us would have ever considered such a low-down move, right? Yet after all, James and John likely believed themselves peculiarly qualified to occupy certain positions that would surely benefit Jesus' long-range goals. And of course, we can't really know whether the idea came originally from the two brothers or from their mother. What we can see is the clear lessons Jesus draws from the encounter and lays out before His disciples in that "teachable moment." So let's exegete the text and draw out the recurrent patterns of the Kingdom, the implications for the meaning of the cross, and the application to our discipleship.

First, we notice *how* Salome approaches Jesus – with deep respect. She understands Him to be the long-awaited Messiah, even if He's also her nephew; **"kneeling and asking,"** the text says literally, though without specifying yet what she's wanting. So Jesus facilitates this slightly awkward encounter by saying to her, **"What is it you want?"** And she proceeds to spell it out: **"Grant that these two sons of mine may sit one on your right and one on your left in your Kingdom."** And the text says Jesus responds to **them**, meaning they're all three there together: **"You don't know what you are asking."** (Seven words in English, four in Greek, corresponding to the Spanish, **"No sabéis lo que pedís"**.) This is followed by a sharp-pointed question: **"Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"** But the boys don't think twice: **"We can"** they answer, brimming with confidence. So Jesus informs them that they will indeed drink His cup [He already knows], **"but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."** Let's review this conversation now, and think about its structure, which consists very simply of the request and Jesus' response. The request is actually stated in terms of a parable: Salome phrases her request in terms of the throne room where the King executes the business of His reign sitting on his throne. In Jesus' Kingdom, will there be nothing to do except sit? I think there will be plenty to do! But she simply wishes for her sons to be at Jesus' immediate right and left, representing the places of maximum honor and glory. That's basically what's being requested. And this is what provokes Jesus' comment, **"You don't know what you're asking."** But it's not directed only to Salome, because it's in the plural (clear in the Greek). Jesus sees that this is a three-way conspiracy, and none of them had any idea just what they were asking, because they could only think in terms of a this-worldly Kingdom. They hadn't yet caught the vision of a spiritual Kingdom. So how often do you and I ask in ignorance like this? Not really thinking in terms of Jesus' Kingdom! According to the Lord's prayer, it should be one of our top priorities, heading our prayer list; i.e., everything we ask in prayer should be conditioned by our seeking first the Kingdom! James and John weren't really thinking about Kingdom priorities, but about personal ambitions (such a frequent topic of conversation among the disciples!), leveraging their advantage, controlling outcomes. How often are our prayer lives limited by those same blinders!

So Jesus asks them a critical question, also phrased in parabolic terms: **"Can you drink the cup I'm going to drink?"** And the lack of hesitation in their answer is a clear indication that they haven't given this a second thought! They don't know what it will involve, as if the cost of discipleship didn't need any serious meditation. But Jesus simply affirms that they will indeed drink His cup ... which should provoke us to ask just what the cup was referring to. In another setting, the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was again speaking in these terms, asking the Father if it were possible for this cup to pass Him by, and some interpret that as the cup of the Father's wrath. But we have to be consistent here: if it were the Father's wrath, then in Mt. 20, He would be telling James and John that **they too must drink of the Father's wrath** – what sense would that make? It's a matter of **exegesis** (drawing the meaning out of the text) vs. **eisegesis** (reading one's own thoughts into the text). We don't want to do that; it's sometimes hard to avoid. But from the context of Scripture, we conclude that the cup represents the communion of suffering that Jesus and His followers will be subject to in this world, which He even promised them in Jn. 16:32, besides reminding them that no servant is greater than his master, no disciple above his teacher. The Gospels make clear that on the night He was betrayed, Jesus was **"delivered into the hands of sinners"** who proceeded to do to Him what was in our hearts. So it was **humanity's wrath** Jesus suffered, **not the Father's!** God was NOT the blood-

thirsty one in that scene! **WE** were! This was not about Jesus paying God off so *that* He could forgive us – it was about us humans expressing our **maximum rage against our loving Creator**, torturing Him to death, which He so humbly accepted at our hands, forgiving us instead of annihilating us. It was the incarnation of our salvation!

So back to the conversation with James and John and their mother, it ends with Jesus' commentary on those places of honor: it wasn't His responsibility to assign those places, since God would take care of that. And if James and John had known who would actually be at His left and right in the moment of His being hoisted up on the throne, they would've been horrified at their own request. "Thief #1 and #2!" What an honor for **one** of them – the one who recognized Jesus for Who He was, confessed Him, and got personally ushered into paradise by the King!

2) We move to the second half of the passage, vv. 24-28, where the other disciples begin to get wind of what the two cousins were up to! And were they ever put out! Indignant that these brothers would try to get a leg up on the rest of them – so unjust! – when in fact, all of them would've done the same thing given the opportunity. So we look first at the simple structure of this section: **reaction** from the others as the truth came out, and **response** from Jesus, drawing out the lessons to be learned. So we've already mentioned indignation, but we can flesh that out in terms of jealousy, rivalry, egotism, envy, pride. In Jesus' response, He calls them together, then appeals to them on the basis of what they themselves can observe in the world ("what earthly rulers are like"); then He contrasts the patterns of the world with those of His Kingdom. It's an exercise we need to pay close attention to, because we are so susceptible to the impact of our world's patterns. It's influencing the church with its ways much more than we are impacting the world with the gospel. We must wake up to this reality and hear Jesus' voice on this.

So what are the **key ideas** we see regarding the **patterns of this world**? Even indignation itself can be a kind of manipulative maneuver – when we put pressure on someone to conform to our criteria. But what else do we see here? The rulers of the Gentiles **"lord it over them"**, and their high officials **"wield power."** Furthermore, these rulers hunger for worldly greatness: control over people and things, actively seeking to be first and to be served. Jesus tells the disciples flatly and emphatically: **"It shall not be so among you!"** So as He contrasts all of that with Kingdom patterns, the first thing He says is the world's way is not my way, nor its thoughts, my thoughts – so don't imitate its patterns! His Kingdom is not about controlling people or using force; it's about service, humility; not seeking first place, but putting the interests of others first; laying down your life for the sake of others, rescuing. That's Jesus' mission He's inviting us to! It's also what the cup of communion with Him is about! Because **when do we see Jesus establishing this pattern with maximum clarity ... if not at the cross!** When He laid down His life as a ransom! That was the maximum confrontation – the showdown – between the God of the universe and the enemy of our souls, who had taken us captive and made us his partners in crime. So Jesus acts as Suffering Servant and Kinsman-Redeemer in this passage by identifying fully with the defenseless captives, even letting Himself be taken captive by the enemy forces, submitting to their torture all the way to death; so the cross is not "magic"– He was resisting the maximum assault of the evil one without succumbing to sin, revenge, or bitterness, faithful to His calling, reigning from that miserable throne, overcoming the **"strong man"** in our favor, so that He could enter His lair, his ultimate domain (death), and demonstrate that even there Satan did not have the last word! So Jesus' very life was serving as the **"ransom"** that broke the hold of the enemy and tore open the **gates of death** with His indestructible life. So He offers us, hostages, freedom from our enslavement simply by our confessing His name.

As we come to this communion table this morning, may we consider our lives according to the "Kingdom patterns" we see illustrated in this Scripture and in our Savior's sacrifice, and may we recommit to following in His footsteps of service and witness on behalf of the lost and oppressed and bowed down of this world!