

VESPERS HOMILY
9 OCTOBER 2016

MARK 10: 35 – 45

PSALM 91: 9 – 16

“Do for us whatever we ask you.” Jesus, smiling, answers, “And what might that be?” James and John, two of Jesus’ earliest Disciples and closest friends want reserved seats when Jesus comes into His “Glory,’ whatever that might mean to them. They are asking for positions of power and prestige, taking advantage of their personal history with an old friend; so much for the ongoing discussion among the disciples about who is “The greatest.”

You may remember that in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 20, they have their mother make the request. Jesus’ response is the same, apparently looking at the two of them while the mother kneels in the foreground. They have no shame.

At that point Peter says, perhaps to himself or perhaps out loud, it’s not recorded, “Excuse me, that’s my seat!”

Jesus says “I can’t make that promise, but thanks for asking. Those seats are already taken by ‘those for whom they are prepared.’

Surely, somebody must have asked “And just who might that be?” We are still asking two thousand years later.

Of course there have been some who knew the answer; the sixteenth century was full of people who were quite sure who would be sitting at Jesus’ left and right. For the Roman Catholic Church of that day it was a matter of good works. The very best work of all was a matter of money. There was a project to rebuild Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome, a very expensive proposition that required financing. Who better to finance it than the faithful? What would be the best incentive for the people to make their donations? The Dominicans fanned out across Europe in a sort of early every member canvas, selling Indulgences, a promissory note that in response to your gift of money your soul, or the soul of a loved one, would be freed from Purgatory and go to Heaven; the more you give, the quicker the trip. Indulgences sold like the proverbial hotcakes. Heaven was crowded.

Actually, I received an Indulgence years ago. It was on a field exercise, on a Sunday morning; a pair of chaplains came out to have services. I could hear the singing from the Protestant tent so I decided to go to the Roman service. The chaplain was a Monsignor, an old friend who apparently had really good connections. He obtained a Papal blessing on my ordination although I doubt that he mentioned I am an Episcopalian. He announced that all of us in the tent had received a “Plenary Indulgence” from the Vatican. As I understand it, this meant that all my prior sins, and all those I might commit in the future, have been forgiven. That has a nice ring to it.

A man named John Calvin took exception to that idea. For Calvin it made no difference what you did, your good works, or how much you gave to the church, the decision about “For whom it is prepared” was made long ago; some people were elected by God to sit with Jesus and some were not, and if you don’t know which you are I am certainly not going to tell you. He called it Predestination. They are also referred to as “the frozen chosen.” Calvin’s heaven was not crowded at all.

All of which brings us to Jesus’ words on the subject. What are His criteria for filling those chairs?

He gives that criteria in many ways but ultimately it’s quite simple. If you want to be first be prepared to be last. Be prepared to be the “servant , the slave, of all.” If you want to sit in the highest place, the best seats in the house, be prepared to sit far, far down from the head table. Ultimately, be prepared for sacrifice, to “give your life as a ransom for many.”

Jesus says to James and John “Can you drink the cup that I drink?” He is asking can you share the sacrifice that I am to make; can you go willingly to your own cross?

Jesus asks James and John “Can you be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized.” Can you be immersed in that which overwhelms me; the sick, the poor, those broken in body, heart or spirit?

And he assures them that yes, you will share the cup and make your sacrifices and yes, you will be immersed in the awesome responsibility that will fall on you as my Disciples, and yes, everything you will do will be done in my Name and to God's glory.

And that is enough.

In His Holy Name.