

# “Following Jesus: 5) Drinking the Cup of the Kingdom of God”

a sermon by

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**Text: “But Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’”  
(Mark 10:38)**

In a recent column in the *New York Times* David Brooks argues that “The United States is becoming a broken society.” The public has contempt for the political class. Public debt is piling up at an astonishing and unrelenting pace. Middle class wages have lagged. Unemployment remains high. It will take years to recover from the financial crisis in which we are now embroiled.

Brooks goes on to quote from a British writer, Philip Blond, who has identified two revolutions over the past several decades that have liberated individuals and decimated local associations. The first was a revolution from the left: a cultural revolution that displaced traditional manners and mores; a legal revolution that emphasized individual rights instead of responsibilities; a welfare revolution in which social workers displaced mutual aid societies and self-organized associations.

Then there was a market revolution from the right. In the age of deregulation, giant chains like Wal-Mart decimated local shop owners. Global financial markets took over small banks, so that the local knowledge of a town banker was replaced by a manic herd of traders thousands of miles away.

The result of all of this is a highly divided, self-centered society that is rapidly losing its ability to function even at a very basic level.

## I.

During the Sundays of Lent we have looked again at the Gospel of Mark as a way of understanding what it means to follow Jesus. This morning we are looking at a section in Mark’s

gospel that precedes the beginning of Holy Week and Mark's account of Palm Sunday. (Mark 11: 1-11)

There is something in the latter part of the tenth chapter of Mark that is consistent with Mark's understanding of Jesus and is highly relevant for those of us who live in a "broken society."

There is a pattern that Mark uses in his gospel on three different occasions in dealing with his disciples. The pattern has three elements: 1) prediction (Mark 10: 32-34), 2) misunderstanding (vss. 35-40), and instruction in discipleship (vss. 41-45).

The setting of this passage is the road to Jerusalem. Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem where he knows he awaits betrayal and death.

The prediction (vs. 32-34) is as follows. Jesus says to his disciples that they are headed to Jerusalem where he will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes and they will condemn him to death. He will then be handed over to the Gentiles who will mock him, spit on him, flog him and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.

This prediction leads to a misunderstanding (vss. 35-40). James and John engage in a discussion with Jesus about their standing in the kingdom. It is clear that they do not understand what Jesus has just said. They have a request for Jesus. When Jesus comes into his glory they want the two highest positions in the kingdom: one to sit on his right; the other on his left.

Jesus replies that they do not understand what they are asking. There is an irony in this in Mark's gospel that the disciples cannot understand. When Jesus comes into his glory and is crucified, on his right and left are not these two disciples but two common criminals.

Jesus then asks these two disciples if they are willing to drink the cup that he will drink and if they are willing to experience the baptism that he will experience. Both the "cup" and the "baptism" are references to Jesus' crucifixion. But James and John do not understand.

The third element of this passage is an instruction in discipleship (vss. 41-45). In this case Jesus contrasts the character of his kingdom with the character of the Gentiles. In the Gentile world the rulers lord it over their subjects and the rulers act as tyrants.

In the kingdom that Jesus proclaims those who wish to be great must first be servants. He makes this point by pointing to himself when he says, "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Some years ago the citizens of France held a popular election to decide who the greatest Frenchman of all time was. Can you guess who that person was? Napoleon? - not a chance. DeGaulle?- not a possibility. The person that was elected as the greatest citizen of all time was Louis Pasteur, one of the founders of modern medicine. When he was a boy his schoolmaster wrote of him: "He is the smallest, meekest, and least promising pupil in my class." Of all the students in his class, he seemed the least likely to succeed. But on his seventieth birthday, a national holiday was declared, and Pasteur, too ill to speak at the celebration, has his son read his message, which

contained this sentence, “The future will belong not to the conquerors, but to the saviors of mankind.”

Strangely enough, Mark follows his section about discipleship with a miracle story, the story of a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, who was sitting by the roadside as Jesus and his disciples came to Jericho. The beggar cried out to Jesus to heal him and Jesus responded by calling the blind man to him and restoring his sight.

Mark then concludes this section that precedes Palm Sunday with this verse: “Immediately, he regained his sight and followed Jesus on his way.” (10: 52)

I believe that the message of Mark is as clear today as it was to the readers of his gospel in the City of Rome some 2,000 years ago.

We have two choices. We can live in blindness, as did these disciples, or we can open our eyes and see. Or, to put it another way, We can choose to live in a “broken society” that is ruled by greed, self-centeredness, and blind ambition, or we can follow in the path of Jesus and determine that we will live in a community of compassion, fairness, and accountability.

In Tom Stoppard’s play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* there is a scene where these two friends of Hamlet are on their way from Denmark to England. Unknown to them, they bear with them a letter that seals their own death. Sensing that they are moving to a destiny that may not be what they first thought it was, one of them turns to his friend and says, “There must have been a moment in the beginning when we could have said, ‘No,’ but somehow we missed it.”

May it not be said of us that there was a moment that we could have said “No” to the path of destruction and somehow missed it.

Amen!