

**29<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**October 17-18, 2009**  
**St. John the Evangelist Parish**  
**Deacon James J. Benjamin**

*Isaiah 53: 10-11   Psalm 33   Hebrews 4: 14-16   Mark 10: 35-45*

As we come closer to the end of the liturgical year  
the readings present to us more challenges  
about what it takes to be disciples of Jesus.

Evidently being overly ambitious was not the way,  
as James and John found out today.

We can imagine why they must have thought they were special;  
after all the Lord had asked only the two of them and Peter  
to accompany him up the mountain where Jesus was transfigured before their eyes.  
They must have been special  
to have been chosen for this privilege,  
or so they thought.

But Jesus disabuses them of their notions of what true leadership meant.  
It is to be the servants of all,  
and the Greek meaning of “servant” was actually “slave.”  
That is, to be one without any rights or privileges,  
to be somebody whom the Greeks thought of as somewhat less than human.  
To be servants of all was not exactly what James and John had in mind.

Jesus also gives James and John and us some powerful images  
of what discipleship is all about,  
and it is on these images that I want to reflect with you today.

The first image: a cup.

In response to James and John asking to sit at his side in the kingdom,  
Jesus asks them, “Can you drink the cup I shall drink?”  
Jews were used to drinking wine at weddings, seders and for any celebration.  
The concept of drinking from a common cup was familiar to the two apostles,  
but Jesus was speaking of a different kind of cup...  
and a different kind of drinking.

Some years ago Joan and I were having dinner with some close friends  
who were about to move to the West coast.  
During the meal they gave us a gift.  
We opened what we thought was a bottle of wine.  
Indeed it was a bottle but it was empty except for some sediment at the bottom.  
We looked at them, surprised and confused,  
but our friend, Jerry, told us that this bottle represented our lives together as friends,

and that they had drunk fully from it with us,  
leaving nothing behind.  
Our friendship was proven, total, and needed nothing more.  
We had drunk the cup together to the full.  
That memory is one I cherish,  
and I think it is part of what Jesus meant.

Can we drink the cup with him?  
Can we share ourselves fully with him, being fully who we are,  
confident in his friendship and in his love?  
When we come up to receive eucharist each Sunday,  
many of us also share the cup.  
We drink the wine that is Jesus,  
filling us, blessing us, transforming us,  
reminding us of his friendship, his presence and his love.  
In this sense, then, we already drink of the cup in memory of him,  
as those apostles did at the Last Supper.

But Jesus was speaking of something more:  
his cup would be a cup of pain, a cup of sacrifice,  
a cup of blood freely poured out for those he loved.  
When we drink the cup, we cannot escape this meaning also.  
James and John were very quick to assert,  
“Oh yes, we can drink the cup,” but they had no idea what they were promising.  
In fact they would run away from the cup of suffering,  
when they realized that Jesus was not exaggerating about his coming passion and death.  
Jesus himself, in his fully human nature, also found it difficult  
to contemplate what drinking the cup his Father had given him was going to mean.  
“Father, let this cup pass from me...”  
but in the end he chose to drink the bitter cup to its dregs:  
“not my will, but yours be done.”

We can't claim ignorance.  
We know the story all too well.  
We are aware that the cup will demand much of us.  
Can you and I drink the cup of which he drank?  
Or do we shrink away when the cost appears to be too great?  
How does that happen?  
Maybe we get sick, or one of our loved ones does,  
and the cup of wine turns bitter.  
Perhaps we lose our job or we lose confidence in ourselves;  
we're older now and can't do now what we used to do easily.  
We're caring for a parent or another relative  
and there isn't any time for ourselves any more.  
It's harder to get dressed in the morning with our aches and pains;  
it's more difficult being sure of our decisions and it takes longer to make them.

We don't enjoy ourselves much any more and we want to put the cup down.  
The cup of life is not tasting the way we had hoped.  
But can we keep drinking this cup of pain and suffering,  
of disappointment and disillusionment,  
still trusting that the Lord is at our side,  
still knowing that we're not alone?

Can we drink this cup all the way to the bottom,  
not losing hope but staying confident in the Lord?

Then, the second image: baptism.

Then Jesus asks James and John whether they can be baptized  
in the same way that he will?

Again, he asked them about something they thought they knew well.  
The high priest would wash before and after offering sacrifices in the temple.  
All believing Jews washed before entering the inner court of the temple.  
These washings were a kind of baptism,  
for ritual cleansing, but also to wash sin away.  
John's baptism in the Jordan was for repentance and the remission of sin,  
as is ours today.

"Yes, Lord, we can undergo this kind of baptism," the two responded quickly.

But Jesus meant more than a ritual baptism,  
and this part, too, is included in our sacrament of baptism today.  
The water over our heads signifies our dying to sin,  
signifies our willingness to enter into death with Jesus,  
so that we can be raised up with him to everlasting life.

Jesus was asking James and John if they could go under the water with him,  
if they could sacrifice their lives too, as he would.  
Maybe they wouldn't have to pour out their blood  
but could they live unselfishly for others?  
Could they offer their lives in service,  
as slaves, to the people to whom they brought the gospel?  
Would they be willing to be the servants of all,  
and to let go of the idea of lording it over them?

And these are good questions for us today.

Can you and I drink the cup?

Can we say "yes" to the life of following the Lord,  
even to the deaths we experience in small ways every day,  
so that we can rise up with him to new lives,  
to resurrected lives in glory one day?

Can we drink this cup to the dregs?

Can we experience fully the baptism of fire,

the baptism of fear, the baptism of pain, the baptism of loss,  
and, finally, the baptism of surrender to what God's plan for us is?  
These are the questions for us in the gospel today.

Can we be baptized in this baptism?

Let us pray that when we receive communion,  
we will be energized as disciples of Jesus  
and servants of one another.

Let us pray that each baptism we witness  
reminds us of our own baptism into the life and death of the Lord,  
bringing us from life through death and into new life forever. Amen.