

**Sermon for the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of St John's Coffs Harbour  
20 October 2024 (22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday After Pentecost)  
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*Alonso Cano St John Blessing the Poisoned Chalice*  
17<sup>th</sup> Century. Musee du Louvre, Paris.

It's an honour to celebrate your 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary as followers of Jesus here in the Parish of Coffs Harbour. 125 years – 1899-2024.

The original St John's was the first place of worship constructed in the town and opened in April 1899.

Perhaps it might help to cast our minds back and think about what was happening around that time. My helpful researcher\* tells me that a lot happened in 1899. It was in that year that the decision was made to locate the new nation's capital in a new place called Canberra. In his Presidential address to the Synod of the Diocese of Grafton and Armidale in 1899, Bishop Green spoke passionately in favour of Federation. He criticised what he saw as the *provincial isolation and artificial barriers* that had set up *sentimental divisions* between the States. Interestingly quite a number of bishops who would play a key role in Australian Church life through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, were born in 1899, including Archbishop Sir Phillip Strong (Bishop of New Guinea, Archbishop of Brisbane and Primate of Australia). On the down side, the Boer War started in October 1899.

As we reflect on 125 years it's appropriate to be reminded in our Gospel that it's not just about being present in a place or community, but how we are present – about the importance of service. Jesus teaches us what this thing called Christian service is, and of what it is not.

In today's gospel (Mark 10:32-45) James and John disappoint Jesus and their fellow disciples by asking for preferential treatment - for positions of honour in the Kingdom. Mark in his gospel, as he records this event in the life of Jesus and the disciples, is direct and clear. Discipleship is not about rewards; it's costly and painful, it requires total commitment. To be a Christian disciple, according to Jesus, is to taste the bitter cup.

John Pridmore\*\* says that we're standing on very firm ground here in terms of the historicity or authenticity of this scene. Mark was not going to make up a story like this one that reflects so badly on his friends James and John.

The scene from our Gospel reading today was the inspiration for Alonso Cano's 17th century painting that now hangs in the Musee du Louvre: *Saint John Blessing the Poisoned Chalice*.

Here John is depicted making a gesture of blessing over the chalice to neutralise the poison escaping from it in the form of a small 2 headed dragon. This was modelled after a legend, but inspired by Jesus' words to James and John in today's gospel, *are you able to drink the cup that I drink?* (v 38 to 39). They replied, *we are able*. Then Jesus said to them, *the cup that I drink, you will drink*.

To be a Christian disciple is to indeed taste the bitter cup as James and John did taste, in different ways, later in life.

We see here in Mark's gospel a contrast between two sets of values, two orientations in life: what God wills for people, and what people want for themselves.

It's easy to follow the world's standards seeking status and power. James and John's request for positions of honour reflect this.

It's self-centred and based on fear of the unknown.

In Mark's gospel this way is a saving of one's life out of fear

But what God wants for people is *surrender*

He wants us to lose our lives for others, and not through *fear* but through *faith*.

Hence versus 44 to 45, *whoever wishes to be first must be slave of all but the son of man came to give his life*.

So we have these two sets of values or orientations.

People who come forward to Jesus for healing in Mark's gospel are willing to serve and be the least. In contrast authorities want to save their lives out of fear in order to acquire status and power at the expense of others.

In Mark's gospel the disciples vacillate between these two ways: saving one's life out of fear vs losing one's life for others.

Maybe we can relate to the way the disciples vacillate between these two ways of life? Saving out of fear, losing out of faith?

But let's not forget about our Old Testament reading from Job.

God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind - he reminds job of God's greatness and of Job's insignificance in the scheme of the universe.

This is part of a longer section (chapters 38 to 42) where God answers job and where Job submits.

But let's not forget the message of the whole book of Job because it's relevant today. The question on which the book of Job hinges is Satan's question: *are humans willing to serve God for no reward? can faith be unconditional?* Quite a pertinent question in the light of James and John's request in the gospel.

Job answers this question in the affirmative. He is willing to be God's loving servant even in the face of suffering. He is willing to serve God without the prospect of happiness or success as a reward.

Maybe James and John should have made themselves more familiar with the book of Job!

The one whom they had chosen to follow, Jesus, turns the values of the world upside down. The one who is first in fact takes the lead in putting others first. This is close to the core of the gospel message of Jesus and Job has helped us flesh it out.

Yes we can serve God without reward. In fact the point is to put others first anyway.

Alonso Cano's painting has a haunting quality about it. It was originally commissioned as an altarpiece for a convent in Spain. As the nuns gazed daily at this image of Saint John peering into the poisoned chalice, they (and maybe we too) are reminded of the costliness of discipleship.

Suffering is part of life, part of being disciples. It's how we deal with it that makes the difference.

Out of fear we can revert to the way of the world and be self-seeking and self-preserving.

Out of faith we can live for others regardless serving God for the sake of praise and of praise alone.

We are here today because our predecessors in this place lived lives of faithful service. They chose for faith not fear. Our challenge is to stand up and be counted in our day; when there are so many things to fear in today's world, we are called, like our predecessors here, to choose faith.

## Notes

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