

Sermon for the Feast of St. James the Apostle

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“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” St. Matthew 20:27-28

In today's gospel Jesus' face was resolutely turned toward the cross and Jerusalem, where He would “give His life a ransom for many.” Along the way, the mother of brothers James and John, two of Jesus' disciples, approached our Lord seeking to exalt her sons above the other disciples. The mother of James and John asks Jesus if her sons can sit on His right hand and on His left hand, positions of prestige, when Jesus comes in His glory. Jesus tells her that they will indeed be with Him in glory, but in the places they are assigned, not necessarily at His right and left hand. And knowing all things, Jesus tells them that, Yes, they too would “drink of the cup that I drink of; and with the baptism that I am baptized withal shall ye be baptized.” They would, along with all the disciples, face persecutions and suffer much for the sake of the gospel and the kingdom of God. They would certainly follow our Lord in His loving giving of Himself for mankind, and James would give his life in obedient service to God, being the first of the Apostles to suffer martyrdom. His death is recorded in the Bible in the Acts of the Apostles. As our Lord proceeds toward Jerusalem and certain suffering and death, Jesus reminds us that “. . . the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Unlike human rulers, who rule for their own benefit, God the Son came to earth to minister to His creation, to heal us and restore us to the place we had before the first man, Adam, sinned. The second person of the Holy Trinity, the Son of God, assumed human flesh from the Virgin Mary and lived among His creation. The Son of God came as the suffering servant of Isaiah's prophecy. He was “. . . despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53:3),” who was “wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities (Isaiah 53:5).” Jesus came

to serve and to give His life as “an offering for sin (Isaiah 53:10).” The son of Man came to die – innocently, and voluntarily, and in accordance with the Father’s will.

And before His death, He offered His life to the father. It is that offering of His life, which culminated in His sacrifice on the cross, which He now eternally offers to the Father in heaven. And in heaven Jesus, fully man and fully God, now stands victorious over death. The suffering servant is now glorified. Jesus is now our great high priest, who has passed into the heavens. Jesus, who is like us in all ways yet without sin, who was dead, but now lives, continuously and perpetually intercedes for us, offering His life and death before the Father. When we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, we offer with Him that same sacrificial life which He offers in heaven. For, the Holy Eucharist is a participation in the glorified, sacrificial life of our Lord, a participation in “the one oblation of Himself once offered.” It, therefore, may truly be called a sacrifice, because at the holy altar we plead with Jesus, our great high priest, His one sacrifice once offered for the sins of the whole world.

Let us attempt to understand that which is beyond human understanding, that which we offer and receive here at the altar. Here we offer to the Father, along with Jesus who is the eternal Eucharistic minister, His redeeming life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Here we receive the sacramental Body and Blood of Jesus, who is both the suffering servant and the great high priest. Here we receive the benefits of the sacrificial life of the Son of God for ourselves. And here, the merits of all that He has done are pleaded on our behalf before the Father by Jesus. So today, let us prepare ourselves to receive the Body and Blood of the Lamb who was slain before the foundation of the world, and let us prepare our hearts to receive all the “benefits procured unto us by the same (BCP)”. “For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf (Hebrews 9:24)”. AMEN.