

People can endure almost anything if they know there will be an end to their suffering and that there will be some recompense. In today's gospel James and John have just heard Jesus speak for the third time about being handed over, mocked, and condemned to death. Unlike Peter, whose response when Jesus first spoke about this was to reject such a scenario, the Zebedee brothers focus their attention on what reward they will gain if they endure such abuse. They envision Jesus enthroned in glory after his ordeal and themselves seated in the places of honor at his right and left.

The other disciples are indignant with the two brothers, probably not because James and John have missed Jesus' message but because they beat the others in requesting the honorable spots!

In response Jesus uses two powerful symbols. He asks if James and John can drink the cup that he will drink and whether they can be baptized with the baptism he will undergo. In the Scriptures, "cup" is frequently used as a metaphor for suffering. That meaning is clear in the Gethsemane scene where Jesus begs God to let the cup pass him by if possible. Likewise, baptism here signifies being plunged into suffering and going through the throes of death, to emerge into new life.

The self-confidence James and John exude is astounding. They quickly assert that they can drink this cup and undergo this baptism. But do they really know what they are saying? Their eagerness leads us to reflect on our own ability to answer Jesus' questions. Perhaps there have been times when we eagerly said "I do" or "We can," without fully knowing to what we were committing ourselves. Or we may know full well the demands of dedicating ourselves to Jesus' way of costly love, but the thought of a reward seems to make it worth the price.

Jesus takes the disciples another step deeper. The reward for which they hope beyond this life is not within Jesus' control to give, and it must not be their motivation. Jesus speaks disapprovingly about any who seek displays of greatness and authority over others apparently even in the next life. The hope of reversal, of the servant becoming enthroned, is not what motivates Jesus, nor should it motivate his disciples.

The only "throne" that he shares with his disciples is the "throne of grace" as we see in the letter to Hebrews. Here, one receives not places of honor alongside him but mercy, grace, and timely help. The source for this mercy is that Jesus has himself endured all that we endure, and is thus able to suffer with all those who suffer.

The explanation of the suffering of Jesus is found in the first reading, where the servant's suffering is spoken of as a vicarious offering for sin, which sets aright the relationship of many sinners with God. In the gospel Jesus speaks similarly about his life given as a "ransom for many." "Ransom" refers literally to the buying back of the freedom of a slave. It is a metaphor that expresses in a limited way the freeing effects of Jesus' costly love.

Today, Jesus teaches his disciples and us that suffering is to turn toward the Merciful One, in whom we place all our trust. This is not an explanation for how a merciful God can allow innocent persons to suffer, but it is the response of faith. As we immerse ourselves in God's mercy, we are baptized in a love that is stronger than suffering and death.