

True greatness and its cost

Mark 10:32-45

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³²And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; and they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him ³³saying, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles; ³⁴and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise." ³⁵And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him, and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." ³⁶And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" ³⁷And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." ³⁸But 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 with which I am baptized?" ³⁹And they said to him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." ⁴¹And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. ⁴²And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. ⁴³But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Over the course of Lent this year, I have been amazed to see a common theme appear on the front pages of the secular press here in Canada and in the US. Picture after picture, and story after story, of young men, leaving their families, their jobs, their friends and their land to follow a leader in a distant land in what they see as a great cause. I don't know how many of them know that they are actually going to die in this great cause, but my guess is that they believe that even if they do, it's worth it in order to make their lives count and, yes, probably to gain a greater glory than they could were they to stay in Minneapolis -- the home of the young man featured on the front page of this morning's New York Times -- or Ottawa -- the home of the young men who were hoping to find glory in Syria -- or Kemptville.

These young men -- and some women who follow along perhaps in the hope of being married to one of those who will gain glory -- are joining ISIS to follow a leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a charismatic preacher, who believes that he has been chosen to create a caliphate throughout the Arab world that will bring everyone living there under the banner of Islam. Eventually that caliphate will extend to the whole world under his leadership. But, while he's the acknowledged leader, there are many from among these young men whom al-Baghdadi considers indispensable for achieving his goals. And when the caliphate is restored, he will reward them with positions of power and honour.

So, too, was it in the ranks of al Qaeda under Bin Laden, a charismatic leader, who had a clear vision for eliminating the enemies of God and creating a caliphate beginning in his homeland of Saudi Arabia. He, too, knew that he could never achieve his goals without the work of key players in his ranks.

So, too, was it in the ranks of the Taliban under the leadership of Mullah Omar. The Taliban -- an Arabic word that means "students" or "disciples" -- had a much more restrained view, victory in the land of Afghanistan, and the creation of a pure Islamic state. But, of course, the view of the Taliban is now that that state cannot just be created in Afghanistan alone: it must include Pakistan, and the surrounding states of the former Soviet Union. And to do this, you need key players, leaders who will guide the advance of the military victory, young men who will follow you and do the work.

It has always been thus among those who believe that the goal is military conquest and then military rule and honour.

This is what the disciples of Jesus, the *taliban* of Jesus, had in mind when they followed him. They, like all of the people throughout Israel, hoped one day to see God defeat his enemies, those who were keeping Israel from being the place of God's

kingdom. And they were sure they knew who these enemies were in their day: the Romans and their puppets in Jerusalem. They knew that there was only way to deal with God's enemies, even as God had been seen to do so in the Old Testament: to defeat them and destroy them and to take away their kingdom and replace it with the kingdom of God following in the model of the great warrior king, God's own beloved David.

It only rarely appears to have occurred to them that these were just occasions for God to show Israel, a weak nation of squabbling and quarreling brothers and their descendants, that they could never defeat greater nations on their own, nations like Canaan, and Egypt, and Assyria, and Babylon, whose whole civilization was built on military might... that Israel stood no chance before these great nations on their own but that those nations themselves stood no chance of standing against God. So, Israel, trust in the Lord always, and not in the might of your own strength.

It was a lesson that Israel never learned. Then, or in Jesus' day, or perhaps even now.

It was a lesson that the followers of Jesus clearly had not learned. Among Jesus' students, his disciples, his *taliban*, there were two young men who were especially known for being hot-headed, ready for battle and ready for glory, the men that were known as the Sons of Thunder, a phrase we might translate today as "Raging Bulls": John and James bar Zebedee. These two were perhaps among those in Jesus' group who, along with Peter, most ready to give their lives in the battle. Were Jesus to ask them to have gone on a suicide mission, they would gladly have done so. After all, they say to Jesus: "we are ready to die with you!" You do remember, don't you, that that's what it means to be baptized? Not to be sprinkled with water, but to go into the waters and to drown, to die. So, "are you ready for that?" Jesus asks them. Yes, they say. Well, you will, Jesus says.

They were ready to march with Jesus to Jerusalem, the seat of power, and see the wonderful victory of God. Like those who have marched off to Syria, and Iraq, and Libya to fill the ranks of ISIS, who are willing to give their lives for the cause of the Caliphate, these two are following a charismatic leader. But, though he is a charismatic leader, perhaps something like al-Baghdadi, or Bin Laden, or Mullah Omar, his vision is not that of a Son of David, a title that is rarely used of Jesus in the Gospels and that is never used by Jesus of himself. Oh, there were messiahs in Jesus' day who did have a vision of the defeat and destruction of those who occupied the land of Israel, just as today young men are being called forth from their own countries to fight against the enemies of Islam and the occupying forces of Americans, British, Canadian, or even their own fellow Muslims whom they believe to be puppets of these empires.

But Jesus was no leader of this kind. James and John were not mis-guided by Jesus as young men are being mis-guided today by calls to war and subsequent glory. James and John could not have heard and seen Jesus and come to the conclusion that they did by listening to him. They came to the conclusion that their task was to march on Jerusalem and defeat Rome by their own all-too-human desires for glory and power and dominion.

And over against those all-too-human desires and the continual mis-understanding of the young men who follow him and fail to get what he is talking about, Jesus appears almost overwhelmed.

Three times... three times!! ... he had told them "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles; ³⁴ and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise." Prior to this he had told them once, and Peter had tried to dissuade him until Jesus turned to Peter and said: "You are the enemy, Peter, not the Romans. So get behind me, you Satan!" ... and then a second time, and they hadn't understood... They hadn't understood when he had multiplied bread for the multitudes in the wilderness. They hadn't understood when he calmed the waters. They hadn't understood anything. And now this third time Jesus again tells them why they are going to Jerusalem and what's going to happen. And when he does, James and John come forward and say to him: So, Lord, when this battle occurs and you are killed in it -- which is not how we had planned it, but anyway... -- and when you are raised up by God -- which we guess must mean that God is going to bring you back after death to defeat the Romans for good -- well, then, we're going to go through this with you, so will you make my brother and me your glorified Minister of State and Minister of War?

Did Jesus just shake his head in wonder at how obtuse these followers were? He had chosen them... they had been with him for, what, a few months, even a few years, and this was what they had learned from him, that Jesus was going to restore David's kingdom and rule in military power?

So, Jesus turned to them and again taught them. But, this time he taught them something that you and I have, centuries later, still have yet to learn: the kingdom of God is not to be just another human institution built on human desires and human ways of dealing: "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise

authority over them. ⁴³ But it shall not be so among you". Whether it be in the form of a king sitting in his palace in Jerusalem, or an emperor ruling from Rome over an empire, or a consistory among the city fathers of Geneva, none of these are to be the models that you are to use for building the kingdom of God.

Why? Because "whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." The Kingdom of God is going to be completely different from anything that you have ever known. In the history of humanity and its political institutions, the Kingdom of God is to be radically different.

And it will start differently as well. Not by defeat and destruction, in which both victor and victim are sucked further down into a vortex of violence, the kingdom of God is start by lifting up the poorest of the poor and the weakest of the weak -- slaves, and children, and women -- lifting them up to the very heights of heaven. How? Because you are going to follow my example in being willing to die for them. I did not come to have people serve me, and I did not call you to be my followers in order to have people serve you. I came to give my life as a ransom... the Devil, our enemy, wants blood? The Heidelberg Catechism gets it right: Jesus says: Let him have mine. And in doing so, the Lord has freed us from the power of the devil.

And, if you want to follow me, then let him have yours. What we are not going to do is start taking the blood of others in order to achieve our ends. Never.

Historical record has it that the first bishop of the great metropolitan centre of Ephesus in Asia Minor, the New York of the Mediterranean in the period of the New Testament, was named Onesimus. Tradition has it that this is the same Onesimus who had been a slave, who had taken refuge with the apostle Paul while he was in prison, and that once he was reconciled to his master Philemon, no longer as a slave, but as a more than a slave, a brother, he eventually became the head of the church in that great city. He never forgot his origins: he had been a slave... and he never forgot what he had become: more than a slave, serving the people of God, slaves and slave masters, children and parents, women and their husbands in that great city... giving his life that they might live. So, it has been with the great leaders of the church who following Jesus, not some mis-guided militant leader, continue to give their lives that others might live. And so that one day we all might come to the fulness of life together in God, and in glory see the one who gave Himself not to judge and destroy the world but so that the world might live through him.