### “Divine Things”

September 16, 2018

**James 3:1–6**

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. . . . 6The tongue is a fire. The tongue . . . sets on fire the cycle of nature.

**Mark 8:27–36**

27 “Who do people say that I am?”28And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” 29He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” 31 Then he taught them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things. . . . 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. (NRSV) 36For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?” (NASB)

From James we have a serious—but also slightly funny—warning: “The tongue is a small member,” yet “the tongue is a fire” that “sets on fire the cycle of nature” (James 3:5–6). And everybody knows what a dangerous whip and scourge the tongue can be, and yet, some of the most fiery tongue-lashings *I’ve* ever heard are found in the Bible. So I guess, to judge any individual tongue-lashing, you have to look at the *purpose* and what’s at stake.

In our gospel reading, Jesus gives a very brief but intense tongue lashing to Peter. So I want to look at what’s at stake there, so we can understand it. I think what’s at stake is the whole Incarnation itself. As the Epistle to the Hebrews says, “he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect” (Heb 2:17). Well, ordinary people do not get to perform a miracle to escape a violent death, so Jesus is not supposed to do that, either. He has to *live through* his life to the end, demonstrating loyalty to God and not using any miracles for his own benefit.

Jesus knows that he has been sent here to live a life to the fullest, and to follow it to its end, whatever end is in store. He has to persevere in the Incarnation experience all the way through. Again, the letter to the Hebrews says Jesus is “able to sympathize with our weaknesses,” for he was “tested as we are” (4:15)—tested *more* than most of us are ever tested, of course. Jesus lives a *whole* human life, and he develops immense sympathy in the course of his growing up with his brothers and sisters in Nazareth, making friends, learning about the Bible, working, traveling, teaching, being slandered and then arrested by his enemies, and finally dying here.

As Hebrews says, “Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things” so that he could “free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death” (2:14-15). Jesus has the power to perform a miracle to escape the violent death that is being planned for him, but that would prevent part of what he needs to reveal. He has to live a *human* life, and then show people how to die with dignity, without any trace of revenge, and without miracle. He knows he can’t entertain *any thought* of escape. He can’t contemplate avoidance even for a moment, and *that* is why he speaks to Peter with such emotion. He is giving warning to his disciples of what is to come, and he accepts what is coming, but wants to shield them from excessive shock. He wants them to be strong and mature and ready to unfold the divine that is within *them*, ready to live without revenge or fear.

These truths of the Incarnation are “divine things” (Mark 8:33). They have to do with being focused on doing God’s will, even if one will lose one’s life in the process. What good is it to escape with your life, but lose your integrity? *So what* if you are famous and powerful? That’s not what matters. Setting your heart on divine values, on spiritual truths, can mean taking a big risk. Even your friends might not understand you; and it can get you in trouble with the bosses.

Like many people who arouse the fears of the powers that be, Jesus is going to be framed, brutalized, and killed. This is not because God requires it, and certainly not because he is paying the debt for human sin, but because frightened and violent human beings cannot stand what he is saying, “cannot bear his words,” to use a phrase from the prophet Amos, to whom something similar happened. Frightened by the prophet, “Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, [said] to King Jeroboam of Israel . . . ‘the land is not able to bear all his words’” (Amos 7:10). Well, that’s how the Sadducees, and some of the Pharisees, felt about Jesus. It’s not the *land,* but the power-clinging bullies, who cannot bear his words.

Religious bullies are some of the most repulsive of bullies, who take advantage of the faithful, and cling to power at all costs. There are bullies in all religions. There are some powerful Muslim bullies in Saudi Arabia. There are bullies among the Catholic clergy, and among Protestant clergy, too. There are even some bullies among the Buddhist monks in Burma. What they all have in common is that they are moral cowards. Because of their secret doubts, they fear those who have a different viewpoint, or different values.

Peter is not guilty of any of that. He is speaking out of ignorance, but *not* sin, not deliberate evil-doing. So we can forgive Peter, as Jesus did. But Jesus had to resist the temptation that Peter offered, the temptation of avoidance. Jesus was not going to avoid the bitter cup.

Most of us will never have to face that, but we might have to face incomprehension or pressure from our friends. You may sometimes need to compromise somewhat, but I encourage you to *always* remain focused on your highest concept of God. Stay true to your best values; they are a signal to you of your eternal destiny; they are like a living prophecy within you. God values *your* loyalty to the best you know. That loyalty will *save your life* (Mark 8:35).

Your life and all of your experiences are *worth saving*. Your knowledge of God’s love and your acts of kindness are needed in this world and the next.

God, help us as we build trust in you, to move forward in our lives, seeking your truth, and sharing the love of Jesus in our families and in our communities. Let the Word become real down here, because of us. Amen.