

Proper 24 B 2021

Isaiah 53:4-12

Psalm 91:9-16

Mark 10:35-45

These are uncomfortable times,  
And we long, many of us,  
For comfortable words.

Words that might have the power  
To change our lives,  
To transform us in this moment  
From a people who are weary, worn, and sad,  
Who cannot imagine a way out  
And wonder if we have the energy  
To get there, even if we could see the way.  
We are a people watching the waters rise around us,  
Watching our institutions crumble,  
Watching our own parish struggle to regather,  
Watching families fray and spirits flag.  
What does the story of scripture do for us?  
How does Jesus change our lives?  
When does the glory break in  
And when do all things become new again?

We long for the words  
That can change our lives.  
And yet, week after week, in this season,  
We get words of little comfort.  
Words that puzzle us,  
That strike us to the core,  
That make us turn away grieving.  
It is no better today.

We long for the soaring words of the prophets,  
The gracious moment when Isaiah proclaims,  
Comfort, comfort my people.  
Tell them their long exile is over.  
Their sins are forgiven.

And what do we get instead?  
The suffering servant,  
Wounded for our sins,  
Snatched away by a perversion of justice,  
Pouring himself out to death.

Like sheep gone astray,  
We long for a glimpse of the good shepherd,  
Bearing us to safety on his shoulders,  
And instead we get the lamb led to the slaughter,  
As if he were the one who had done wrong.  
Little comfort there.

We long, perhaps,  
In the story of Jesus told in the gospels,  
For one of the moments when he welcomes us,  
Heals us,  
Offers us a vision of the life that is really life.

And instead, today,  
He gives us a bracing, unnerving, troubling wake up call.  
An invitation to join him  
On a way where there are no shortcuts.  
It doesn't help that the wake up call begins  
With one more stupid question,  
One more bone-headed request  
From the disciples –  
Who could be any of us.

As we look at the story of James and John,  
Who want Jesus to do whatever they ask,  
Let's try not to distance ourselves from them,  
To pass judgement on them.  
Let's allow ourselves to imagine  
That it could be any of us,  
Who come to Jesus as they did,  
Wanting what we want when we want it.

James and John –  
What were they thinking?

They were among the first called;  
They responded immediately  
When Jesus came walking by,  
Dropped their nets,  
Left their father alone in the boat,  
And followed.

Early on in their life with the wandering teacher,  
He gave them a nickname,  
Sons of thunder.

They lived into it,  
Before too long,  
By asking him  
If they could rain down fire from heaven  
On those who did not listen.  
(Jesus said no.)

And still made them part of his inner circle;  
They climbed up the mountain with him  
And saw him transfigured in a blaze of glory,  
With Moses and Elijah  
On his right hand and on his left.

And they wanted to share that glory,  
So they asked.  
Or rather,  
They told.

We want you to do  
Whatever we ask of you.  
Let us be the ones  
Who sit at your right hand and at your left,  
In your glory.

They don't have any idea  
What it means to enter into the glory  
That is Jesus.  
No idea that the glory they seek  
Is found on the cross.

Who knows what they were thinking,  
When they said, without hesitation,  
We are able to do what you are going to do.

What were they thinking?  
Most of us, many of us, know by now  
That that's a question with no answer.  
What were they thinking?  
They weren't thinking.  
They had no idea.

But the tradition tells us  
That they found out.

They found out what it meant  
To follow on the way of the suffering servant of all,

The way that leads to the ultimate witness of the cross.

James was the first of the twelve  
To be martyred.  
The Book of Acts tells us  
King Herod put him to death by the sword  
In the first wave of persecutions.

And what about John?  
That's more mysterious.  
Was he the same as the beloved disciple,  
Who laid his head on Jesus' breast  
And listened to the heartbeat of God?

If so, then tradition tell us  
He lived to be a very old man,  
And finally endured the white martyrdom of exile,  
Homeless on the isle of Patmos,  
With his head resting on a rock.

In the end,  
James and John drank from the cup that Jesus drank.  
And they founded, each of them,  
A spiritual tradition that endures to this day,  
Offering comfort and inspiration,  
And challenge and disquiet  
And a glimpse of glory  
To those who follow on the way.

The body of James,  
It is said,  
Made its way to Spain,  
Where it hallowed the ground of Compostela  
and inspired a way of pilgrimage  
that has drawn thousands upon thousands  
of the faithful, and the questioners,  
and the curious to the great and mysterious cathedral  
that is his shrine,  
a thin place where the holy comes close,  
and glory can be glimpsed.

And what about John?  
If we follow many threads of story and witness,  
It seems possible he became the spiritual leader  
Of a community  
That gathered stories, and sayings,

And prophetic witness  
Into what became the fourth gospel,  
The gospel that is unique,  
mysterious, infuriating and inviting.  
A gospel that invites us to come and see  
What it means to abide with the holy.

It was John's witness that inspired  
The mysteries of the Eastern Orthodox tradition.  
That crossed the seas to become  
The evocative, evanescent way of faith  
We have come to know as Celtic Christianity.  
A way of following Jesus  
That celebrates the sacredness of all living things,  
That sees the glory of God shining from our eyes  
From the moment of our birth.  
A way of faith that recognizes us all  
As equally precious and worthy,  
Equal partakers in the glory of God.

That's what happened, perhaps, when James and John  
Got more than they bargained for  
And drank from the cup that Jesus drank,  
And were baptized with his baptism.

They became witnesses to the glory of God.  
They founded traditions  
That continue to invite us into the mystery.

But what does this mean for us now?  
Here's what I hope.

I hope that like James and John,  
Though we may utter rash and foolish promises,  
Though we may make ignorant and ridiculous demands,  
Though we may have no idea what we are talking about,  
Jesus will love us anyway,  
And carry our folly on his shoulders  
All the way up to the cross,  
And turn it all into glory there.

We can't do that for ourselves.  
And we can't help doing what we do.  
We say rash and stupid things,  
We make messes we can't clean up,  
We hurt each other by accident and on purpose.

None of that need keep us from Jesus.

If we stick with him,  
As James and John did,  
He will lead us on our way.  
We don't have to be smarter than we are,  
Or better.  
We have to keep following,  
And asking our dumb questions.  
We will find, in the end,  
That we have been transformed.  
From our unique quirkiness,  
Our darkness and sorrow,  
Our shame and guilt,  
Something beautiful will come.

We are gathered up in glory in spite of ourselves.  
That's the saving work of Jesus.

In these times,  
When we very seldom get what we want,  
And almost never when we want it,  
One thing will never fail.

Jesus will find us where we are,  
Love us despite ourselves,  
Gather us into his glory,  
And make something of us.

So let's stick with it,  
And see what God has in mind for us now.

There is a share of glory  
Waiting for us,  
And a story still waiting to unfold.