

Healthy Church Mark 5: Reflections of the texts

Ephesians 4: 1-7; 11-16; Mark 10: 35-45

What is at the heart of a healthy community?

Is it factionalism or a perpetual struggle to assert dominance? Is it the desire of individuals to assert their individualism at any cost?

This is certainly happening in some of the churches visited by St. Paul.

A healthy community needs to be motivated by the kind of love which factors the needs and aspirations of others into the conversation. Love of others is the key - the crowning virtue – the gift to be desired and practiced beyond any of the other spiritual gifts, (cf. 1 Corinthians 13). This servant-hearted love was what Jesus modelled to his disciples.

It is helpful that today is Valentine's Day. No-one is really sure who St. Valentine was, but it is safe to say he would be shocked to discover in a journey through time just what is now made of his memory. St. Valentine is not responsible for pink champagne or chocolate hearts. It's thought that St. Valentine may have been a Roman priest martyred on the Flaminian Way during the reign of Emperor Claudius (c. AD 269). Legend has it that he looked after persecuted Christians, became a convert, was persecuted himself and was clubbed to death. Not many hearts and flowers surrounding this account of costly love, but much closer to the single-hearted love of God which Jesus is talking about to James and John. Discipleship costs, Jesus explains: 'Are you willing to go through with it?'

If James and John are to form Christian communities in the future, they need to understand and embody servant-hearted love. In the Gospel we heard today, they are still lost in the all-too-human prerogatives of one-upmanship and competitive rivalry. We know from elsewhere that they are nicknamed the 'sons of thunder.' Maybe their audacity explains the name? James and John exhibit the universal desire for 'significance' – of wanting to be 'a cut above' the rank and file. How many times has this desire been seen in church communities?

Jesus responds to their request for places of honour by questioning their understanding. Their eyes are still shuttered by ego-driven needs; the nature of the Kingdom of God eludes them. They do not grasp the cost of discipleship. When Jesus asks '*Can you drink the cup that I will drink?*' they blithely reply, 'Yes'. They are oblivious to the solemnity of Jesus' reply – they will '*drink his cup*', but not in the way they expect.

They will experience the same baptism. As it says in Ephesians, '*There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism*'. Yes indeed, and baptism was understood by Jesus and by some early church Christians in a way that not immediately obvious to James and John. Jesus' baptism was about literally dying to self and rising to new life. In the following decades his followers would also be baptised - many of them into the waters of death – into a martyr's death – and into the hope of rising to new life in Christ. St. Valentine would have understood this.

The request of James and John angers their fellow disciples and draws a clear reminder from Jesus that he came to serve. And service is what he expects of his disciples – then and now. To serve is to love – and we all need each other.

The miracle is that in the early days of Christianity, James and John lived and died in the service of others. Their attitude of *me first* was transformed by the Holy Spirit into *others first*; expressed by James' martyrdom and John's foundation of a vibrant community and the gift of the Gospel which bears his name.

As a Christian community are we primarily a bunch of individuals, keen to assert our own interests and needs, or do we come together keen to build up the body in love?