

21 Pentecost, Year B, Oct. 18, 2015; St. Mary & St. Tim's,
S.Lake;
Job 38:1-7; Ps.104:1-9, 25, 37; Heb.5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45;

In the first confirmation class I ever taught I asked the young folks to think of three things about themselves that they could tell to someone who wanted to know who they really were, who wanted to know their identity. They all stated their names and a couple of their favourite things. Since they were in the class so that they could affirm the promises made on their behalf at baptism I asked why no one cited their baptism as important to their identity. I received a whole battery of blank stares. I suspect that if I had asked that question of a group of adults I might have gotten the same reaction.

Our scriptures today speak of various identities: that of Job, of God, of Jesus, of Jesus' disciples, among whose number we are counted. Job has, for many chapters of the book bearing his name, been calling God to account for his undeserved suffering. He accuses God of having dark designs on his righteousness. He is sure that if he could just corner God face to face and reason with God, that God would apologize to him for this undeserved suffering. Job's friends have been trying to tell him that he might as well confess his sin to God because nobody would have that kind of suffering if it wasn't deserved. Job rightly rejects that argument but he persists in demanding that God be accountable to him.

So, in today's reading, God answers Job and God does not apologize. God says stand up like a man and I will question you who darken counsel with words without knowledge.

Then God proceeds to ask Job if he can do what God did in creating the world and the creatures therein, including the rain, the snow, the lightning and the thunder. Where were you when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

God is saying "I am not like you, Job. You have no understanding of who I am, the one who created everything." In this reading we do not hear Job's response to God, but I expect he had to think quite hard about who God is and who he, himself, is in relation to God; he had to wrestle with his true identity as a creature of the Creator.

The letter to the Hebrews speaks of Jesus' identity as our true high priest. Like all human priests he is appointed by God, and he can, by virtue of his humanity, empathize with our frail humanity. Unlike the other priests he does not have to offer sacrifices on a regular basis, he only has to offer himself once for the salvation of the whole cosmos, for he is the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him. And he obeys God and he learned this obedience through suffering.

Today's gospel reading follows immediately after the third time that Jesus tells his disciples that he is going up to Jerusalem and he will be killed and he will rise again on the third day. I don't know if you have noticed that every time Jesus has made this announcement his disciples behave badly. The first time he told them Peter rebuked him and said that is not going happen to the Messiah. And Jesus had to tell them all that if they wanted to be his disciples, they each had to take up their cross and follow him. They had to be willing to lose their lives for his sake and the gospel's in order to save their lives, in order to have a life worth living.

The second time he announced his impending death and resurrection, the disciples responded by arguing with each other about who would be the greatest among them. Jesus had to teach them that whoever wants to be the greatest has to be the servant or slave of all, and they have to receive the kingdom as though they are children.

He tells them the third time that when they get to Jerusalem, and they have been on the road to Jerusalem for some time now, that he will die and be raised on the third day. James and John respond by asking him to give them the highest positions in his kingdom – to be seated at his right hand and his left hand. Jesus tells them they don't know what they are asking. Then he asks them if they can drink the cup he will have to drink and whether they are able to be baptized with the baptism he will undergo. They blithely say 'yes, we can.' They still don't know what they are saying. They are acting as though they have not heard Jesus at all. They are thinking and acting as though once they get to Jerusalem it is going to be glory all the way.

Jesus says that is not how it is going to be. He says they will have to drink the cup of suffering that he will drink. He tells them that though they have been baptized with water, they will have to be baptized by suffering just as he will. And then he says he doesn't have authority to give them what they ask for because the seats at his right hand and his left hand are for those for whom they have been appointed.

They have just recently come from Mount Tabor where Jesus was transfigured before them and there they saw

Moses and Elijah, one on Jesus' right and one on his left. They have already forgotten that.

The other ten disciples get wind of James' and John's question and they are indignant. I would hazard a guess that their indignation was because James and John asked the question first, not because the other ten were more exemplary disciples. Jesus teaches them again that whoever would be first among them must be the slave of all, for the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Mark is not shy about pointing out the shortcomings of the disciples; their misunderstandings of Jesus; their self-centeredness; their continual missing the mark in terms of discipleship. But all the while he is telling us that those same disciples continued to follow Jesus in spite of not comprehending what Jesus meant a lot of the time. And Jesus continues to teach them right up until the last possible moment of his life.

That should be encouraging to us, who also sometimes, often maybe, do not grasp what Jesus is saying about how we are to live, who we are to be as his disciples. Jesus kept teaching those first disciples about their identity as his disciples, his apprentices, even when they kept forgetting it. Jesus, through the words of scripture, through the power of the Spirit, through prayer, through other people, still teaches us about our identity as his disciples, his apprentices, his ministers, his servants, by virtue of our baptism.

Mark also maintains that the disciples could not properly understand what Jesus was saying until after his death and

resurrection, when they received a new perspective on his life and death and their role as his disciples and apostles. We also have opportunity to encounter the risen Jesus and gain a new perspective on and understanding of our discipleship of ministry and service to others.

So I explained to my confirmation class that in baptism we have been ordained to a life-long ministry of service to others in Christ's name and that is why our baptism is a central feature of our identity as Christian people. We also have to be always taking into account God's identity as the creator of all and Jesus' identity as Saviour and Lord, our great high priest, in order to keep our identity as his ministers and disciples in joyous and fruitful perspective.

Bless the Lord, O my soul; O Lord my God, how excellent is your greatness! You are clothed with majesty and splendor. Bless the Lord, O my soul. Hallelujah! Amen.