

## **Revising Expectations (Mark 10:35-45)**

Over the years, advertising has undergone a subtle but important shift. Originally, advertising attempted to convince people of the superiority of the product. In the 70s, for example, Pepsi began a longstanding ad campaign called the "Pepsi Challenge. In it, people were shown taking a blind taste test between Pepsi and Coke, to demonstrate that people liked the taste of Pepsi better than Coke. (I'd like to meet those people because I'm not sure they exist.)

Advertising, though it perhaps began as an argument for why you ought to buy something, has become a different kind of thing.

Neil Postman writes:

*The television commercial is not at all about the character of products to be consumed. It is about the character of the consumers of products. Images of movie stars and famous athletes, of serene lakes and macho fishing trips, of elegant dinners and romantic interludes, of happy families packing their station wagons for a picnic in the country—these tell nothing about the product being sold. But they tell everything about the fears, fancies and dreams of those who might buy them. What the advertiser needs to know is not what is right about the product but what is wrong about the buyer (Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 128).*

It's called "Aspirational Advertising." And somehow, we know that instinctively, don't we?

Beautiful, intelligent, successful people buy everything from Old Spice body wash to De Beers diamonds. It's not that these products are touted beside other products as superior. It's that in order to use or own these products you have to be a certain kind of person.

We live in a culture that values money, power, and beauty. If you want to get ahead in this world, our culture is quick to let you know just who you need to **be**, what you need to **do**, how much money you should have in your bank account, and when you get the right amount of all of it, just how you should look to be able to keep it.

We know what it looks like to occupy the top rungs on the socio-economic ladder, don't we?

We know what kinds of cars you're supposed to drive, what kinds of watches you ought to wear, what your favorite tequila should be, where you're supposed to vacation.

We know what you're supposed to look like, how smooth your skin's supposed to be, and how good your breath should smell.

Disney's taught us how little girls are supposed to look. And Marvel has taught us how little boys are supposed to **want** to look.

We've gotten the message. We know what glory looks like.

Large and in charge. According to our culture, a meaningful life must include not just excellences, but you have to excel in something that **everybody** recognizes as worth possessing.

Outside the State Fair, for example, being the best pickle canner

isn't going to bring you the kind of acclaim our culture believes is worth pursuing.

We know what **true** glory looks like.

Apparently, James and John have gotten the memo, too. They've bought the age old belief about what it means to get ahead in life. So, they come to Jesus and they ask if—when he comes into his glory—they can have seats on the 50 yard-line.

Of course, there's a **flaw** in their plan, isn't there?

Unfortunately for them, it's not immediately **apparent** from where they sit. In fact, they might be forgiven for not understanding their error, cutting against the grain as it does.

I mean, they're not **entirely** dim. They know enough to know that this Jesus is going places. They're aware of the rumblings about Jesus being a "messiah." They know the "Jesus train" is

about to leave the station. The problem is ... they believe it's going in a completely different direction from where Jesus is actually headed.

They **think** they know, but they show by their wrangling for seats in first class that they don't have a clue.

Our Gospel this morning comes right after what is regularly called the "third passion prediction"—that is, the third of those passages that discuss Jesus' immanent betrayal into the hands of his enemies.

Three times in Mark, Jesus says he's going to die and be raised again.

And three times the disciples demonstrate that they don't get what he's talking about.

Today's text is the third time the disciples demonstrate that they don't have a clue about what's at the heart of Jesus' ministry.

But, as [Rolf Jacobson suggests](#), perhaps "passion prediction" isn't the best way to understand what Jesus does in telling about his impending death. Jacobson argues that we would do better to understand these occasions as "Interpretations of Messianic Identity" or "Announcements of Messianic Mission" since to talk about them as a **prediction** is to imply that the most important issue is whether or not they came true—which isn't really the most interesting question.

Because what the disciples demonstrate they don't understand about Jesus' mission has less to do with whether or not it will come **true**, but what it might mean if it **does**.

What am I talking about?

Simply this: the disciples ask to have important positions alongside the new Messiah, to be included in all the grand happenings after Jesus comes into his glory. They have understandable expectations about what that glory will look like in this new world Jesus is announcing. That they don't have even the slightest clue that Jesus is going to be killed as a political criminal demonstrates that they don't **really** comprehend what kind of **glory** Jesus is going to come into.

Mark shows us that the disciples are laboring under the common misperception that still plagues popular understanding of the meaning of life—that in order for a life to be meaningful, for it to achieve the kind of glory we tend to think **defines** meaningful lives, there must be power and success. There must be fame and beauty and money.

The expectation is that the Messiah's glory will look like a life worth slapping up on a billboard, worth singing heroic ballads

about, worth holding up as an example to all ambitious young people whose motivation in life is to conquer the world.

You see, that's the kind of thing "Messiah" had always meant. Messianic glory was political/military glory—the kind won at the end of a sword and then maintained with ruthlessness when necessary.

To be sure, the kind of messianic glory Jesus announces comes at the end of a sword ... Unfortunately, it's at the wrong **end** of that sword—the sharp, pointy end, dripping with humiliation, blood, and defeat.

But we're not so different today. Given the current state of the world, people tend to think glory and success come from some amazing aptitude or from an especially vigilant attention to detail. Beautiful, intelligent, successful. That's the message. And it's a hard one not to buy.

Heck, even the church often buys that message. Congregations know what **true** glory looks like, don't they?

Big, important, swarming with new people—in particular, those folks between the ages of 25-49 with children and business cards that suggest professional jobs.

Small, irrelevant, marginal. These, our culture tells us, we can ignore. Who needs failure anyway?

Unfortunately—and here's where I haven't done my job very well—Jesus isn't singing from the same hymn book as the rest of us. (I wish he'd get with the program.) Always flying in the face of conventional wisdom, Jesus redefines success downward.

Small, irrelevant, marginal?

That's precisely the kind of raw material Jesus seeks out to build this new world. "You know that among the Gentiles those whom

they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant."

Not helpful. Popular Christianity promises a Jesus who only wants to be your pal, a Jesus who doesn't want you to be inconvenienced, a Jesus whose real concern is that all your biases are continually reconfirmed for you. A Jesus who knows what true glory looks like. And, let me tell you, that would be a whole lot easier on me.

But unfortunately, I'm not good enough figure out how to give you **that** Jesus.

Instead, I'm so incompetent at my job that all I can manage to figure out how to give you is a Jesus who seeks out the small, the irrelevant, and the marginal. I'm only skilled enough to show up on Sunday mornings with a Jesus who thinks glory looks like

losing, sacrificing, and dying. I hope you'll forgive me my vocational inadequacies.

In Shusaku Endo's wonderful book, *Silence*, he tells a story about the Jesuits coming to Japan in the sixteenth century, which gave rise to a mass conversion to the Christian faith. But there arose a resentment of the Christians among those in power, and a backlash ensued. A horrible persecution of the Japanese Christians began.

In the story, Rodriguez, a Jesuit priest, has gone to Japan as a missionary. He's devout. He spends much time in prayer and contemplation, but his devotional life is obsessed with a terrible problem. Despite his earnest prayer and contemplation, he hears nothing from God.

He waits and prays—frustrated that there seems to be no one listening. His prayers only seem to bounce off the ceiling.

The ragtag group of Japanese Christians to whom Rodriguez has grown so attached continues to be persecuted and killed because of their faith. It's as if Christ has turned his back on those struggling to follow. Rodriguez cannot get past the horrible silence of God. It becomes almost unendurable for him.

Soon, Rodriguez himself is captured by the authorities and put in a small, dark prison cell. While he's there, he thinks he hears snoring coming from someone nearby. He supposes that it's one of the drunken guards. Then he's told that it's not the snoring of drunken guards, but the labored, awful breathing of some former Japanese Christians who have, after torture, apostatized, forsaken their faith, but have nevertheless been hung upside down with tiny incisions around their eyes for the blood to drip out slowly into the excrement at the bottom of the pit, causing a slow, agonizing death.

Rodriguez, of course, is horrified at the thought of their plight—especially since they've apostatized. So his captors tell

him that the people are being punished because Rodriguez won't apostatize himself. All he has to do is put his little toe on a bronze image of Christ. They tell him that it's merely a bureaucratic formality. Nothing really, in the grand scheme of things.

But how can he turn his back on his faith, which is what they're asking him to do? On the other hand, how can he stand idly by while people suffer because of his faith?

"Just trample the image, and they will be set free," his captors tell him. Rodriguez wants to take the picture, which has been marked by a thousand toes that have trampled upon it; he wants to take it and kiss it.

He raises his foot. In it, he feels a dull, heavy pain. This is no mere formality because he's being asked to trample a symbol of all that his life has stood for. His anguish overwhelms him. How can God continue to be silent in the face of all this? Surely now, God would speak a word.

And then, the Christ in bronze image breaks the silence. It speaks to the tormented priest, "Trample, trample. I more than anyone know the pain in your foot. I came to be trampled upon. Trample! It was to share your pain that I carried my cross. Put your foot down. Trample on me!"

We beheld his glory, a glory that required us to revise our expectations, redefine the **true** meaning of glory.

"Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory," James and John said—not knowing that Jesus' glory is probably going to sound pretty unappetizing.

The glory of Jesus, the glory James and John can't wrap their heads around, is in allowing himself to be trampled by those who think true glory requires power and violence.

Jesus—a grain of wheat cast to the earth, trampled on, buried in the dirt.

He ***achieved*** true glory.

He was finally exalted, lifted up before the eyes of the world.

But, as Fred Craddock has pointed out, the only time when he was high enough to look down on us from the heights of glory ... was when he looked down at us from the cross.

But the way God sees things ... ***that's*** the true meaning of glory.

-Amen.