

In this Sunday's gospel, for the third time in Saint Mark's account of his long march towards his suffering and death in Jerusalem, Jesus is yet again confronted with the radical misunderstanding of his mission on the part of his disciples.

The brothers James and John, sobriqueted the "sons of thunder", approach Jesus with a very bold, some might say outrageous, demand: " 'Master,' they said to him 'we want you to do us a favour.' He said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' They said to him, 'Allow us to sit one at your right hand and the other at your left in your glory.' Their approach is couched more as an imperative than as a request. Their proposal is really quite breathtaking in its audacity. This is not lost on the other ten apostles in formation: "When the other ten heard this they began to feel indignant with James and John." They are not so much disappointed in the worldly motivation of their confreres, as miffed that they may have left it too late to make their own bids for the top jobs in the messianic kingdom.

Showing remarkable composure Jesus' reaction demonstrates nothing of the indignation and impatience of the others. He takes quite a different approach, subtly coming to the core of the matter: "You do not know what you are asking", he says to James and John. "Can you drink the cup that I must drink, or be baptised with the baptism with which I must be baptised?" he asks them. Their minds and hearts still pre-occupied with the status and power which now seem within their grasp, the brothers promptly side-step the challenge with which Jesus confronts them. "We can," they blithely reply. Jesus then solemnly concludes his response to them, "The cup that I must drink you shall drink, and with the baptism with which I must be baptised you shall be baptised, but as for seats at my right hand or my left, these are not mine to grant; they belong to those to whom they have been allotted.' In the event, John is the only apostle who is spared martyrdom, while James is blessed with the honour of being the first of the apostles to follow in the footsteps of the King of Martyrs.

To the whole group of the Twelve, Jesus teaches: "You know that among the pagans their so-called rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. No; anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be slave to all. For the Son of Man himself did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

This doctrine either shocks us or we have not begun to absorb it. How can the one, true God, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God and Saviour of the human race, possibly be our servant? How could he give his life to secure our freedom ("give his life as a ransom for many")?

At this stage of their careers, James and John see Jesus as a means to an end, and not a very noble end at that - the fleeting earthly cluster of wealth and status, power and authority. Their minds and hearts are still not converted to the knowledge and love of God in Jesus of Nazareth. And yet, with great patience, Jesus continues to love them and forgive their brashness and self-centredness. This love will require his giving of his very self for them, and ultimately the pouring of his own Spirit into them which will enable them to love him in return. This is, in essence, their

salvation: his loving them and their loving him in return, with the very love with which he has filled them, which is his Holy Spirit.

It is this same John, and yet the new John, who inspired by this Spirit of Jesus in John's sublime gospel, will recall with a new understanding the encounter between Jesus and the woman at Jacob's well. In their conversation with Jesus, James and John sought to use him for their own promotion. Jesus' attitude to the woman who had had five "husbands", and was now in a relationship with a sixth, is quite the opposite. Although he is in a position to misuse her, his only motive is her salvation. She drinks from the bottomless well of his Spirit: "If only you knew who it is who is speaking to you, you would have been the one to ask (for a drink) and he would have been the one to give you a drink (of his Spirit)."

Jesus's disinterested love for the woman sees her drink of his Spirit, of his love. She is drawn to love him profoundly in return. This unnamed woman is a doubly marginalised person: she is not drawing water from the well with the other women of her village of Sychar at the cooler times of the day, but is there by herself in the heat of the middle of the day. She is also ostracised by the travelling Jews of Jesus party because she is a Samaritan. The disciples are doubly shocked when they return to find Jesus alone with a woman, who is also a Samaritan. (Jesus is never squeamish in the presence of women, even when he is with one of those several women he encounters in the gospel who are of doubtful reputation.)

Incredibly, it is this same woman at the well who becomes the fruitful missionary to her whole village, the village that had previously despised her! Converted in heart and mind by Jesus' selfless love for her, she is coming from a place of love for him in return. She wants to share this Good News of her forgiveness, of her new life and well-being, of her SALVATION with the very people who had until now ostracised her.

In the age of the "new evangelisation", when all the baptised are called to be missionaries, who or what is fuelling our own missionary impulses, particularly in our own village of Surry Hills?

How readily do we simply dismiss the missionary potential of ourselves and others?

The pivotal or catalyst missionary in our own community may end up being the person least likely in our eyes.

Here are a couple of other offerings which particularly caught my attention during the week:

- From the Instructions of St Columbanus, abbot and missionary (Office of Readings, Second Reading 12 October):

"Beloved Saviour, show yourself to us who beg a glimpse of you. Let us know you ... Fill us with love of you, let us love you with all the love that is your right as our God. Let that love fill us and possess us, let it overwhelm our senses until we can love nothing but you, for you are eternal."

- From the feast day of Saint Teresa of Avila (Friday 15 October):

Saint Teresa (1515 - 1582) is an outstanding example of how the contemplative life can well up and overflow into action. In addition to her many letters, she wrote much on the subject of contemplative prayer and her writings are still standard works today. She was declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul VI in 1970.

A favourite story about Saint Teresa illustrates the intimate relationship that the saints have with God. When she was on one of her innumerable journeys across Spain, her horse threw her as she was crossing a river. Soaked to the skin she looked up to heaven and said: "If this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few of them!" We should bring everything to God in our prayers, even our reproaches. For a reproach, in the end, is simply our way of offering up to God our incomprehension of what he is giving us.