

Mark 10:32–45

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) · 20 March 2012

The texts for Lent 5 bring us into the orbit of Holy Week, and particularly of Good Friday. Even the disciples, not noted for their subtlety, had a sense of what was coming. At the beginning of our gospel text in Mark 10, Jesus makes his third prediction of the passion, announcing that he is going to suffer and die. He has said it twice before. The first time it came as a real shock that just bowled the disciples over. The second time they must have thought, “Well, he’s not kidding.” Now, the third time, things are getting pretty serious, and it is starting to sink in. And of course what happens is what normally happens when death draws near: people start fighting over the leftovers, wondering where they are going to stand in the last will and testament, and all the rest of it.

The contrast between Jesus and the behavior of the disciples could not be sharper. Jesus, obedient unto death, is now going toward his death ineluctably, a step at a time, irreversibly, going to what will be, for all intents and purposes, the end of him. And the disciples are literally fighting over the leftovers, particularly their standing. James and John are first in line. But the rest of the disciples, on hearing of it, are pretty ticked off and worried sick that maybe they have lost an advantage. That’s the way it goes. He goes in utter selflessness, and they go worried sick that they are going to lose something: not Jesus, but something of their own.

Jesus will not be deterred. Each of the texts for this Sunday focuses on his obedience: its shape, its intent, its workings. He was obedient unto death, as Paul says in the great Christ hymn of Philippians 2:5–11, and Paul interjects, “even death on a cross.” That obedience is the precondition of his going to his death. He has surrendered his own will into the hands of the Father, and he goes about the purpose for which he was intended, unallayed, unaltered, undelayed. He is going now to be put to death. So he surrenders the action from here to the close of the story. Even though he is in control of a few things, and can still make some arrangements, he is being carried now. It is all but over.

So first we’ll take a look at the supporting texts, and once we’ve done that we’ll linger, or at least play, over this gospel from Mark 10, which sets out to proclaim the whole thing to us.

I Will Remember Their Sin No More: Jeremiah 31

We have Jeremiah 31 up again. This is a very familiar text, one we pick up at various points during the church year. It is a Reformation Sunday text, and we get it a couple more times, it seems to me. I didn't take time to look it up, but we surely remember verses 31–34. It is the promise of the new covenant that God is going to make with Israel, not like the old covenant, which they broke, but a new covenant written on their hearts: "I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

Now, that is the precondition for a covenant when you are dealing with sinners. Ordinarily a covenant is a mutual agreement. That's the trouble with using this language, which the Calvinists love so desperately: it makes it appear to be an arrangement among equals. But the condition of this covenant, the biblical covenant, is different, even though it gives the appearance of being a mutual agreement. In our text the condition is spelled out. The condition is forgiveness and God's forgetfulness.

If he did not forgive, if he remembered the way we remember, with memories we go back to again and again and again, accusing and seeking retribution against those who have hurt us, if God remembered in this fashion, there would be no covenant whatsoever. It would be a disaster. The condition of God's new covenant is the forgiveness of all iniquity and the end of remembrance: "I will remember their sin no more."

I remember getting a letter once, when I wrote an article for *The Lutheran* or one of those church magazines, from a man in Wisconsin someplace who wrote angrily that God cannot forget, that every sin is an offense against his sacred law, and that forgetfulness could never be a divine characteristic. Well, God is the only one who can forget. Our memories are etched in us psychosomatically. They are written deep within us by chemical transactions in our brains. What is written there we cannot forget. Only God can forget. And it is his joy to forget, so that when he says, "I will remember your sin no more," it is the assurance that there is no point in this covenant at which he is going to say, "You know, I just found out about that night in the pool hall in Baltic, South Dakota," or in a tavern in Dilworth, or in Buffalo, South Dakota, wherever. There is never a point at which he is going to discover what may by some chance have been forgotten. "I will remember your sins no more."

So the promise is of a new covenant. Here, though, the focus is not so much on the covenant as on the kind of obedience that follows from it. The old covenant was written, external. It was for the hands and feet. This one is written on the heart. It is a covenant in which the law will be written deep in the human heart. So the obedience will not be the contrived obedience of the law, or the limited obedience of the law, or the see-how-much-I-can-get-by-with obedience of a sinner, or the “he certainly didn’t mean all that” kind of obedience that sinners specialize in. It will be the obedience of the heart, in which the law is actually written within, and so is not something external we measure ourselves against, but something internal, a prompting, a driving, an intuitive, heartfelt reaction.

That is the kind of obedience we see in Christ Jesus. With sinners, of course, you take your chances. But when Christ Jesus obeys, he obeys from the heart. And he carries it all the way to the end, not asking whether he has done enough yet, or whether it isn’t finally over so he can quit, but always seeking anew to bestow what he has been given for our sakes.

Legal Piety: Psalm 119

Psalm 119:9–16 is pure legal piety. Piety is a helpful thing, of course, even if its helpfulness is limited. In faith we get taken up in relation to the other. In piety we start thinking about ourselves and what we ought to do in relation to the other. And then we start in, like Psalm 119, about how much we love your law. That may or may not be true. Maybe it’s “I love to love your law.” Or maybe it’s “I love that you notice I love your law.” There is something about this psalm that is just a little fishy, because the psalmist is watching himself praise the law. And of course that is a pretty good indication of a divided heart.

But it’s a fun psalm to study. I’ve spent way too much time on it, of course. I read a psalm a day, and when we get to Psalm 119 it takes a week, and by the time the week is over I’m not sure whether I love the law or not. You get the sense of the disappointment. The psalmist praises the law, loves the law, wants more than anything else to be conformed to the law. But the harder he goes about his pious praises, the more aware he becomes that what he loves is also his indictment. “I will meditate on your precepts, and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.” This is the most admirable intention in the world. Among sinners, however, the chances of that love actually materializing in the kind of obedience the psalmist hopes for are slim to none. If it were not for the condition of forgiveness, this psalm would be utterly preposterous.

But in Jesus it is a different thing. Psalm 119 could be taken as a literal description of Christ Jesus' obedience, because in fact he does love the law. Not because the law is going to redeem us, but because he knows its futility, feels sorry for it, and has come to establish this new covenant based in forgiveness rather than legal piety. He comes to deliver our consciences from the accusing voice, so that without the law we can do what the law requires, so that we can go about our Christian life admiring, giving thanks for, and rejoicing in the perfect obedience he has rendered. So Psalm 119 is a bit of a fiction as it applies to us, but as it applies to him you can take it as a literal description. This is what he did. This is what he's good at. He wrapped the law around his finger, and when he wrapped it around his finger he broke its back, so that from here on it limps. It can make its accusations, but now he has the last word, and it's over and done.

A Priest Forever: Hebrews 5

Hebrews 5:1–10 is a very challenging text, and frankly I'm still wrestling with it. Here we have Jesus' obedience dressed in the language of the priesthood. As soon as you get sacrifice, you get sacerdotalism; you get a priesthood. So we begin with the high priest: "Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins." Here we go. You can just see the chute opening right at the beginning. We are going to get swamped now in the language of the whole sacrificial system.

But as he begins this way, the author of Hebrews is setting up a contrast. "He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness." A priest who is not deluded knows that he is a sinner among the others, as we all do. "And because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people." So far, so good. This is exactly how it works. This is a description of the priest, or the preacher. "And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was." You would have to be a blamed fool to try to usurp this calling, because of course you get implicated right off the bat.

So there we go. Now the contrast is set. "So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed." We could say even more than that: from the beginning it was God's will that he should take up this calling. He was appointed, and in this he is beyond any priest. "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; and as he says in another place, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." Now the priest and his sacrifices have

to stand aside, because the new one has come. This is Christ Jesus, and Christ Jesus is a priest forever.

“In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.” Well, here we go. Once you let the law in the front door, it bars the back door, and pretty soon your reverence is being measured, and it is being argued that God can’t resist answering your prayer because you’re so reverent. If that’s it, we’re in deep doo-doo from start to finish.

“Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.” This is where the cross and the incarnation start to move. He enters this priesthood not to remove us from death, but to enter into suffering. “And having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.”

I have to say I’m a little lost. I imagine there are those who can make better sense of this. But once we get priesthood, we’ve got sacrifice; once we’ve got sacrifice, we’ve got law all over the place; and once we’ve got law all over the place, obedience becomes the measure of everything. That is certainly true of Christ Jesus. He can stand on the scales of obedience with anyone, and he can offer the perfect obedience of the Son, whose obedience comes not from external command but from the heart. But for the rest of us that scale is a fearsome thing. I don’t like scales generally. As a matter of principle, a couple of scales have gone flying across the bathroom and smashed helplessly on the floor, and I have relished their destruction. Scales of this kind of obedience are troublesome. So I am a little apprehensive about preaching on this text. It sounds more like something the Calvinists would like. Maybe we can let them have it and go to the gospel, which is a whole lot more fun and a whole lot more promising, because here we see Jesus’ obedience handled not theoretically but in the actual stuff of everyday life.

Fighting over the Leftovers: Mark 10

So we’ll work our way into the gospel now, which is a lot of fun. Jesus’ announcement of his suffering and death sets the context. In fact verses 32–34 are in parentheses; they can be read as part of the text if you wish, and they are certainly the background. He has told his disciples for the third time that he is going to Jerusalem to suffer and die, and it is sinking in deeply.

They are realizing that he is in fact serious about this, that it is not something he recently smoked, and not an illusion. He is going there. He is going to suffer, and he is going to die.

So what happens is the kind of thing that happens in families when the patriarch or the matriarch is going. The whole family starts gathering around, wondering what's going to be left. You remember that famous last scene in *Zorba the Greek*, where the old woman is dying and the women of the village, mustachioed and black-swathed, gather around like crows, ready to divide things up. Here it's not widows; it's James and John, who are the quickest to seize the opportunity they see arising before them. They don't want him to die, but if he is going to, they might as well get what they can.

So they go with the weirdest and most transparent kind of play. There is nothing clever about this. "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." In other words, give us a blank check. We want it all, and we'll take it portable, please. They're right out of the box, straight after him, looking for everything they can carry.

"And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?'" You can hear the irony in the question. He is going to do something for them they never dreamed of. He is going to save them. He has already been at work in these guys, and he is going to complete the job. He is on his way to his death. "What do you want me to do for you?"

"And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.'" Well, you've got to give them this: this is faith. You've got to give them this, that they are not going to ask for small gifts. Just like Luther's famous example in the Large Catechism, they are not going to ask for a bowl of beggar's broth. They are going to ask for the whole shooting match, and they do. They are concerned about the seating order. They intend to sit at his right hand and his left, that is, to be dealt into the power he has obtained by his suffering and death. They are lined up like a couple of vultures, ready to pounce on whatever is likely to come loose.

"But Jesus said to them." Now you have to hear tenderness in this: patience, long-suffering, kindness. "You do not know what you are asking." I guess we could say that's an understatement. It's redolent with irony: you don't know what you're asking me. He deals with them far more tenderly than he might. He'd be entitled to a little impatience here. He is going to die, and they are already dividing things up according to their intentions.

And then he uses the language of the sacraments, which is very interesting. “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” You don’t need any explanation of this language. The cup is the cup of suffering. That is a common image, and it is picked up in Paul’s statement concerning the sacrament: “As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” The cup of suffering is the cup, the chalice, from which we receive the sacrament. We are joined to him and his suffering there. “Are you able to be baptized?” Here the word “baptized” has been expanded beyond water. This is the baptism of fire. This too is the baptism of suffering.

You’ve got to hand it to James and John. You could wonder whether they’d been kicked by a cow just before the conversation. This is not utter sophistication. But they say to him, “We are able.” Well, we know how long that is going to last in Holy Week: about ten minutes. Not even that. Peter becomes their representative, and of course he is going down before he even stands up fully. The whole story is told in such a way that Peter becomes the butt of it. He has to stand there and watch as Jesus turns and looks at him, and Peter remembers his threefold denial. Luke 22:31–32 is one of the great passages in all of Scripture: “Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” He knows that Peter is a betrayer, and he knows how long this boldness is going to last. James and John too: in the end they all forsook him and fled, according to Mark.

At any rate, they say, “We are able.” And Jesus takes them on: “OK. The cup that I drink you will drink.” You are going to suffer too. You are going to bear the cross into daily life. You’ll be carrying it behind me. You’ll drink from this cup. “And with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized.” This baptism of suffering will be yours as well. “But to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” This is a lot of fun. I’ll come back to the promise made here, but first we should look at the reaction.

“When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.” That’s just what happens: the other ten, apparently including Judas now, who had already made his own plans, are indignant. How many families have you dealt with at a time of death? You know how this works. Even the most devout families divide up into warring camps. It doesn’t always happen, but it happens commonly enough: “Mom always said that was for me.” And you know the rest of the story: people never speak again after the division. So it is hardly surprising that the ten

were indignant, because they and James and John are all playing by the same rules. And they are the rules Jesus states here: “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.”

That’s how it happens when you become a bishop. Of course you have the authority to take power even over friends. You have the power to say, “We’ll interpret the Scripture for you, thanks a lot. Your opinion doesn’t mean spit. We’ll rule over you.” The Gentiles rule over us. They determine the proper interpretation, and they determine that all the rest of us have been out to lunch for all these years. If we’d belonged to the Missouri Synod, or better yet gone to Seminex, I suppose we’d all know. But the Gentiles rule over us now, and since we are being ruled over, that’s the way it goes.

Jesus doesn’t tell the story as I just did, turning it into an indictment. He tells it descriptively. This is just the way it works. The Gentiles lord it over one another, and so do we. When we get authority, we extract it from the hide of those under authority. But now something different is happening, and that is what’s so gorgeous in this story.

Not Mine to Grant

First we go back to that middle passage, verse 40: “To sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” When sinners get authority, we ignore the limits. We want to extend the authority as far as it will go. Just like James and John and the other ten, we want to extend it so that we can take it out of the hide of our neighbors and lord it over them. That’s the way it works. Once you get the authority, you start putting your finger in the nose of those under you and extracting flesh. That’s just how it happens. James and John are playing by those rules, and so are the other ten. So when the head man is taken, the order at the trough is disturbed, and they are prepared to fight it out: who can lord it over the other, who can get the most and grab the most and hold on the longest, and so survive the altercation that follows the death of the leader.

That is generally the way it goes. We know this story altogether too well. All of us, as pastors, have been in these situations, watching families come to funerals with obvious malice worn like a garment, and it seems the most pious are the very grabbiest. Nobody needs any instruction in this.

But what is amazing here, what is utterly gorgeous, is that Jesus, who will have all authority in heaven and on earth following the resurrection, says, “It’s not mine to give.” It is not his to

give at this point. It will be his to give: following his resurrection, when he is manifested as Lord of all, then of course he will be able to give.

It's so fun. There is predestination all over this text. "To sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." And who is that, and who has done the preparing? The Father has made these decisions. He has been preparing since before the world was made, and you are one of those to whom he has prepared to make his promise. He has made it, and he will keep it. You are chosen. So you don't have to contend for authority, because he has already made you the apple of his eye. He chose you before you occupied your mother's womb, and he has gone about your whole life keeping you in his promise. So there is no point fighting over authority. You're already in, and you already have the necessary authority.

So you can be like that wonderful Norwegian out in Stanley, North Dakota, who has oil on his land and is bringing in something like \$180,000 a month. And he's ticked off: "What do I need that for?" He's putting it in the bank. He doesn't like to be disturbed by all that money. Well, you don't need to be disturbed by all that authority. Christ Jesus is already going to his death precisely for you, and he goes to his death knowing that you are one who has been chosen since before the world was made. You are one of those for whom these seats have already been prepared.

A Ransom for You

If that's not enough, he goes on with an even better promise. He knows the limits of his authority, and therefore he is willing to give his authority away. "But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Now, you men and women are preachers of the gospel. You have been chosen by Christ Jesus as emissaries of his word. The Holy Spirit takes you by the tongue Sunday after Sunday to give you the pen of a ready writer, to give you a voice so that you can sing his praises. So when you get into the pulpit with this verse, I don't want to hear you leave it in such a general sort of way. Jesus puts it in a general way so that you can put it in the particular. "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom" for whom? For you.

And what was the ransom? He entered into the realm of death. He entered into the habitation of dragons, into the abode of the evil one. He entered into your conscience. And entering into your conscience, he entered it to strip away the accusations, to announce that he would remember them no more, that they had been absorbed in his blood; to take up all the remembrances and the recriminations, all the sorrows and all the pain, all the disappointments, all the self-flagellation and all the self-incrimination. He came to take all that upon himself and to forget it, to wipe it out, to blot out your iniquity so that you could live.

And so he becomes your ransom. He becomes the one who has paid what you owe, so that he can turn you loose and set you free in the promise. Not so that you can go out and enslave somebody. Good Lord, how stupid would that be? But so that you can go and give him away, give away his promises, and so enter into this Holy Week once more, in the utter joy of it. Here he comes, ready to throw himself away on you again. Can you imagine? He has the taste for it in his mouth. He doesn't know any better. Good thing for each of us.

We'll leave it right there. Have I given you something to work with now? I think so. You have this great reversal, and Jesus is playing it out, because he is going to become its victim. He is going to throw himself away again.

Questions and Answers

A comment on the bronze serpent in last week's gospel.

I didn't do nearly as much with you last week as I should have on the fact that Jesus turns that snake on a stick into a vehicle of redemption. But Hans Wiersma preached on it last Wednesday night at Saint Anthony Park, as a guest preacher, and he tore right into it. He just set that text on its neck. Did we get a sermon? Holy mackerel. Jesus becomes the snake on the stick, and in so doing he forces us to look at what we abhor, because in looking at what we abhor we see our liberty emerging. Can you imagine? Boy, that was some sermon. John 3:16 never sounded better. I wish I'd thought of that. I know Luther did, but I should have gone into it with you more last week.

A comment on reading Psalm 119 in the light of the gospel, hearing Torah as word.

Yes, I do read Psalm 119 in light of the gospel. And you suggested last week that we should hear Torah as word, or gospel. I think that's a very good idea. There you go. Once the gospel

dispels the law's sovereign claims to everything, hearing the word is hearing the gospel again and again. And then we say, "I love your word, O Lord." Holy smokes, can't get enough of it.

A comment on justice and mercy.

That's exactly right, Brian. One of the great things about growing up on the prairies was that I was taught from childhood never to pray for justice. And whenever that lesson was repeated, the warning was appended: you might get it. If we pray for justice, we are asking to be dealt with not on the basis of grace but on the basis of our past. And of course when that happens, we're dead meat. All this justice talk makes me real nervous, because that is likely to happen. God will take us at our word and say, "Well, if you want it, here you go." Good night, that's the end of us. Justice flowing like blood in the street: that's frightening. But mercy, that's another matter. Grace, that's another matter. Forgetfulness, that's even better: "I will remember your sins no more." That's as good as it gets.

I think I've told you the story about Papa Smith, my old teacher, who visited a woman who was descending into an abyss of mental illness. Every time he went to her, he told her one thing: "Everybody else may have abandoned you, but Christ Jesus will never let you go." When she emerged on the other side of the abyss, that was the word that had gripped her and held her through all the abandonment. This is one of those words: "I will remember your sins no more." You can't get a better promise than that. Everybody else, of course, enjoys remembering, and invests our sins at compound interest, to be collected whenever there is a potential advantage. When that happens, forgiveness doesn't feel like forgiveness; it stings like any other indictment. So this is the pure promise of all promises. He is going to forget, and he is the only one who can.

You know that I'll be holding you in my prayers through the week. Holy Week is an ordeal; almost invariably you get a couple of funerals on top of all the preaching. But you have a great text to bring you into the week, and you have time to prepare for Palm Sunday, and then Holy Week starts to unfold, and we can rejoice that our cross has been shared decisively by Christ Jesus. God's peace to all of you. We'll look forward to talking with you next week. All the best!

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4RFRKzfBcQ>

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