

**20-10-24,
SERMON OS 29.
Isai 53: 4-17, Heb 5: 1-10, Mark 10: 35-43**

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Have you ever said, or thought, 'Oh no, here we go again, same old, same old...'? Jesus doesn't actually say that in our Gospel reading today, but I'm sure he thought it. The commentaries I've read usually include the previous 3 verses with this reading where Jesus predicts his passion for the third time, with rather more detail than earlier in Mark. Then straight after Jesus saying 'they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him and kill him and after three days he will rise again' here are James and John asking for a favour – 'Can we sit on your right and left hands when you come into your kingdom?' – these were the places for the most important followers of someone, so James and John don't seem to have taken in what Jesus has just said. As a side note, in Matthew's version of this which was written later than Mark's, it's their mother who asks for this favour – my commentary wryly asks if this is a NT example of a woman being blamed for men's bad behaviour! Jesus asks them if they can drink his cup of suffering and be baptised with his baptism – and considering that he's just predicted his passion again – they've got no excuse for not understanding what the cup and the baptism meant. They assure him that they can and Jesus acknowledges that they will indeed suffer for him, but he can't guarantee who will sit at his right and left hands – or perhaps, it's not actually a relevant request.

Jesus goes straight on to talk about what matters in the new order he's instituting. Sitting at the Lord's right and left hands is part of the old order where those at the top lord it over those lower down the pecking order. Those at the top can easily become tyrants. And that sort of power has no place in Jesus' new order. Earlier in the gospel the disciples asked him who was the greatest, and he responded by bringing a child into the circle – greatness isn't associated with power, children aren't powerful!

Jesus says greatness in his kingdom means service – those who want to be great must be servants – or even slaves – to everyone. A real reversal of the attitudes of society – the sort of reversal that keeps coming up in the Gospels – think of Jesus touching untouchable lepers, or touching the dead to raise them (both of which would have made him ritually unclean according to the understanding of the time) or the beatitudes in Matthew – 'blessed are the poor'... But after, again, turning the disciples' expectations upside down, in today's reading Jesus goes on to say why he came: 'The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve' – so far so good, it's what we'd expect from what he's just said – but it's the next part that has always tripped me up 'and to give his life a ransom for many'.

I hadn't realised how little reflection there is in the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – about the purpose of Jesus' life and death – you have to go to John and the Epistles – especially Paul – for that reflection. So this verse in Mark is actually rather important. Now, as most of you know I grew up in Sydney and there everyone knew what that verse meant: Jesus died because God demanded his death because of our sins. All through the OT there are details of the Temple worship with all the various sin and guilt offerings, most involving the death of animals. The Israelites were emphatically **not** to follow the practice of surrounding peoples

and offer their children – usually the first born or the first-born son – as human sacrifices to their God – YHWH was **not** like the gods of the ‘nations’. YHWH did **not** want human sacrifice. So this interpretation of God needing Jesus’ death because of our sins goes against a whole long Biblical tradition of the sacredness of human life – think of Abraham being told to sacrifice Isaac in the OT and then God telling him to stop at the very last minute. Here there is no last-minute reprieve for Jesus. And I really do **not** like what such an interpretation of ‘ransom’ says about our God – if love is the central aspect of God’s character, and I believe it is, then deliberately sending his only son to die really doesn’t sit very well with a God of love!

So, is there another way of interpreting ‘ransom’? The Greek word λυτρον does mean to ransom – to buy back a slave, or someone who is condemned to death... But it does have another possible meaning. It’s related to the verb λυω, to loose or to free. And the person who freed someone, usually someone who was in some sort of bondage, was called a Redeemer. Now Mark doesn’t have Jesus’ so-called ‘Kingdom manifesto’ – that’s in Luke – ‘The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour’. ‘To proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind’? – I’m sure it’s no coincidence that the very next section of Mark’s Gospel has Jesus healing blind Bartimaeus – a demonstration of that Kingdom manifesto! But he came ‘to proclaim release to the captives’ – maybe it’s not too far-fetched to interpret λυτρον, ransom, in our Gospel reading in the sense of liberating us, freeing us from whatever bondage is oppressing us. That bondage is traditionally interpreted as ‘sin’ but that’s been so overused in the Christian church that it’s really not very meaningful today. So the question is what are we in bondage to? And another traditional answer is ‘riches’, ‘wealth’ – that may well be so if we’re lucky enough to be wealthy! But not everyone who is wealthy is in bondage to their money! For some of us the answer may well be surprising – some of us may be in bondage to fear – we’re just too plain scared to step out of the mould we know and become who God fully meant us to be – remember that Jesus came to give us abundant life – that’s not Mark – that’s part of John’s interpretation of why Jesus came! For others it’s literal unchosen bondage in looking after a sick or older relative, bondage because it was not willingly chosen, or maybe it’s a share portfolio, or even being overly involved in their grown children’s lives. What we’re in bondage to may not be immediately clear and how Jesus can set us free us – redeem us – is probably even less clear. But that is part of the Gospel promise.

And, of course, ‘releasing us’ may mean letting us see the situation in a different light so that it no longer feels like bondage. God works in very mysterious ways, but in those mysterious ways God’s love always works for our redemption, our freedom. But, of course, there’s a catch – we do need to accept that love and redemption – and sometimes it’s not easy. The old grooves are very familiar even though we rail against them, and it can be very hard to see a way out or accept the way that’s offered.

Jesus’ purpose ‘to give his life as a ransom for many’ isn’t a case of here we go again, as was the request of James and John. His purpose really is offering us a new stage in God’s loving purpose for the world. May we have the grace to accept what is freely offered to us. Amen