

If we ever hear news of a ransom being demanded, we sense that at best it is meant to scare us, but at worst it is meant to cause harm to many people. There was a case in Sydney some years ago where a high school student was abducted on her way home from school. Soon afterwards, her parents were contacted anonymously and asked to pay a large sum of money – a ransom – if they wanted to get her back safely. The question in cases like this is whether or not to pay the ransom. In more recent times we have seen a new type of ransom, connected with cyber-crime and the theft of data. Unless certain demands are met, the data will be released on the dark web. I guess we are all familiar with what a ransom is. Basically, it is an approach to life that sees it terms of a transaction or a series of transactions. It is a mechanism for having power over people.

The question that has puzzled me is why Jesus speaks of giving his own life as a ransom for many. It might seem to suggest that his life is the price God is asking in order that all creation might be set free from the bondage of sin. But there is a problem if we think narrowly in those terms, because it is not consistent with the way the Bible speaks about God. When Jesus speaks of his life as a ransom he is not thinking of life as a series of transactions. He has in mind the sort of image we heard in the prophet Isaiah in the first reading. That was the story of God's servant who was suffering terribly but who endured the suffering so that people might be free. His suffering lifted the burden people were experiencing. It reminds us of Jesus' saying elsewhere in the gospel, "Come to me you who labour and are heavily burdened and I will give you rest". In today's gospel, when Jesus speaks of his life as a ransom for many he is once again – for the third time – telling them that he is destined to die and to be raised on the third day. His death will usher in the salvation of the world.

When we understand this, we can appreciate the conversation Jesus had with James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They wanted places of honour, one at his right hand and the other at his left hand in his glory. They were thinking in terms of personal honour; they wanted to get ahead of the other disciples. And we know that the other disciples became indignant at this. We should recognise what is going on here. They are seeing life in terms of winners and losers; they have quite a transactional view of life. Jesus challenges this. He asks if they can follow him right up to the point of death. Can they drink the cup that he must drink? They say that they can, but we know that they don't really know what they are agreeing to.

What we are hearing today is another teaching on discipleship, just as we have heard over the last few Sundays. The exchange between Jesus and James and John begins to shift their attitude from wanting prestige (and probably power) to attaching themselves to Jesus who gave his life as a ransom for many. These two disciples were beginning to learn that Jesus was motivated by love not self-interest. His life became a ransom in that he freed people from what was burdening them, and he helped them to walk tall as the sons and daughters of God. This is what James and John were called to do.

Of course, Jesus' teaching in today's gospel was not just for the disciples following him on the road or for the early Christian community who received Mark's Gospel. It is also told for us. We might be like the two disciples who wanted places of honour at Jesus' right and left hands. We might grasp the ideal that Jesus holds out to us. But just like the two disciples, we can also recognise that despite our saying that we can drink the cup he drinks or be baptised with the baptism with which he was baptised, we often fall well short of the ideal Jesus puts before them and us. I think the secret of Jesus' lessons on being a disciple is to realise that discipleship is a life-long journey. Just as his words about ransoming his life were fully realised in his death, so we will be growing in discipleship right to the end of our lives.

As we listen to the word of God, and are moved by God's grace, one way we can grow as disciples is to recognise that discipleship is lived concretely. For example, it is about how we give of ourselves in all our relationships. It is about how we treat those who suffer or are looking for help. It is about how in all our dealings with others, we give them the dignity that belongs to all the children of God. It is about how we engage with those we love, but also how we engage with the stranger.