

New ideas can be hard to take. Particularly when they go against our existing thoughts and preconceived notions. It's often easier to hold onto old ideas than it is to embrace change. Particularly when those new ideas mean giving up the dream of a lifetime. Something like that seems to have been going on with the apostles in today's gospel. They had been traveling with Jesus and reveling in the miracles, the teachings, and their newfound status as his close associates. Yet, they didn't seem to comprehend the gravity of what Jesus had been trying to tell them. In the verses leading up to where today's gospel begins, Jesus predicts his coming passion and death. And the fact of the matter is that it's the third time Jesus has done so. Yet, all three times the disciples fail to understand what Jesus is trying to say. Indeed, bible scholars pointed out that a prominent feature of Mark's gospel is the unfailing presence of Jesus to failing disciples: Peter after the first prediction (8:32); John after the second (9:38); and James and John after the third. Today's reading begins right after Jesus tells the disciples: **“Behold, we are going to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will hand him over to the Gentiles, and they will mock him, and spit upon him, scourge him, and kill him, and after three days he will rise.”** This third report is the most detailed prediction of where they were headed as disciples of Jesus. You would think that it surely must have been a sobering moment for the twelve.

The gospel tells that the disciples were afraid. So what happens next seems a bit strange. Immediately, James and John say to Jesus – teacher we wish that you would do for us whatever we ask of you! Grant to us that we should sit one on your right, and one on your left, in your glory. It's almost as if they were so mesmerized by the promise of glory, that they just bypassed that handing over, mocking, spitting, scourging, and killing part! So Jesus asks them - **Can you drink the cup; can you be baptized as I will be baptized? This I can do for you,** Jesus says, **but sitting on my right or left? That's not**

mine to give. And immediately, the remaining ten are furious. James and John had beat them to the punch! All of the disciples are hell-bent on basking in Jesus' glory. The problem is, they don't seem to fully understand exactly what Jesus is saying. Given the fear, confusion, and jockeying for position that's going on, it's easy to imagine the whole scene degenerating into something of a free for all. And maybe it would have, except for one thing -- Jesus' unfailing presence to failing disciples!

Jesus calls the twelve together, and explains that disciples should not do what the world does. Followers of Christ are not meant to rule, lord over, or wield authority over others. And the gospel, written in Greek, has Jesus using a most curious word to drive the message home – *doulos* – a word variously translated as *servant* or *slave*! And both words are used in the translation from the Greek. They almost jump out at us. **Whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for all.** In Mark's gospel, Jesus heals, teaches, and preaches God's kingdom. That's what Jesus came to do. It's that very same mission that Jesus kept trying to explain to the twelve. And it's ultimately the same mission that each one of those failing disciples ultimately took up. And just like the twelve, we are called to that same mission -- to heal, to teach, and preach God's kingdom. In the very same way that Jesus did! To the point of *doulos*! Where the great will be servant, and the first will be slave!

It's a hard business, putting away the power and authority that the world teaches. And it can be just as hard to embrace the *doulos* service that Jesus preaches. But we need to try and should never lose heart, even if we fail. The disciples also failed, at least at first. But failure doesn't mean hopelessness. Because Jesus' unfailing presence is always . There are several take home messages in today's gospel: imperfection, service, sacrifice, and the cross to name a few. But as we begin to prepare the table, let's focus on just one. Greatness in the Kingdom of God is a gift for those who make no claim to

power or status. That's the mistake that James and John made by their not so subtle demand of "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you!" It's a common mistake that we all make at one time or another. Yet, demanding that Jesus do whatever we ask is to totally miss the point about Jesus' unfailing presence. To live humbly as followers of Christ, our demands must be transformed into a prayer -- Teacher, we want to do for you and for the many, whatever you ask of us!