**LECTIONARY FOR THE NINTH WEEK OF TRINITY SEASON**

 Morning Evening

July 25, Sunday, Triity 8, St. James

1st Lesson 1 Kings 10: 1--13 1 Kings 12

2nd Lesson Mark 10: 1–31 Matt. 10: 24—end

Jult 26, Monday

1st Lesson 2 Kings 14 2 Chronicles 26

2nd Lesson 1 Corinthians 10: 1–11: 1 Mark 10: 32--end

July 27, Tuesday

1st Lesson 2 Kings 15: 17—end 2 Kings 16

2nd Lesson 1 Corinthians 11: 2—end Luke 19: 1--28

July 28, Wednesday

1st Lesson Isaiah 7: 1–17 Isaiah 8: 1--18

2nd Lesson 1 Corinthians 12: 1–27 Luke 19: 29--44

July 29, Thursday

1st Lesson 2 Kings 17: 1–23 2 Kings 17:24-end

2nd Lesson 1 Corinthians 12: 27–13-end Mark 11:11–12:12

July 30, Friday

1st Lesson 2 Kings 18:1–8 2 Chron. 30

2nd Lesson 1 Corinthians 14: 1–19 Matt, 22: 1--22

July 31 Saturday

1st Lesson 2 Kings 18: 13—end 2 Kings 19

2nd Lesson 1 Corinthians 14: 20—end Matt. 22: 23--end

Aug. 1, Sunday, Trinity 9

1st Lesson 1 Kings 17 1 Kings 18

2nd Lesson Luke 1: 1–25 Matthew 11

**ST JAMES THE APOSTLE**

When we go looking into today's Gospel from Matt. 20 for a sermon, we are confronted by an embarrassment of riches. Here is a story of two disciples, with their mother in tow, asking for special privilege and status in the kingdom Jesus was soon to inaugurate. The request might not be as pre-sumptuous as it appears. There are clues which suggest that the mother of James and John was a sister of the Blessed Mother and therefore Jesus' aunt. That would make James and John the cousins of Jesus. Family ties were important in that age and the request would not seem out of order to them.

But here are some of the issues which emerge in the passage. First, the sinful desire for rank and power in God's kingdom That is hardly a thing of the past. Ambition for office and influence plagues the Church in every place and time, at every level from parish to diocese to province and even to the ends of the earth. Whereas Matthew and Mark tell this story, Luke does not. Instead he told a far more shocking incident in which the Twelve, gathered in the Upper Room on the night of the betrayal, only hours before the crucifixion itself, squabble and quarrel over "who should be the greatest."

Second, the timing of the incident shows the shallowness and insensitivity of Christians to the way of the cross which Jesus has taken. Our reading begins at verse 20. This follows the third great prediction of the passion, in which Jesus had said, "and they shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify, and the third day he shall rise again."

Do we hear only the final part of that prophecy? The happy indifference to our Lord's agony for us probably explains our preference for a "beautiful" and "glorious" cross to the wooden crucifix which confronts us with His pain. But the incident in today's Gospel reading is so embarrassing (to James and John and to us well) that we know it must have really happened. Anyone who invented such a tale would be guilty of slander.

Finally we must notice the gentleness of our Lord's rebuke, which is hardly a rebuke at all. He reminds them "Ye shall indeed drink of my cup and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with." As Paul tell us in Romans 6, all who are "baptized into Jesus Christ are truly baptized into his death." The mother, who seems so opportunistic, was one of the women who gathered at the foot of the cross to watch Jesus die. James was the first of the twelve apostles to die as a martyr for the faith. John was the "first to believe" the good news of Jesus' resurrection, lived to a great old age and had a vision of "new heavens and new earth" while enduring the existence of a penal colony. They were not wrong when they said, "We are able." LKW

**THE TRANSFIGURATION**

Here we are, in the dog days of summer and nearly half way through the long season of Trinity (the “Trinity Trek”), celebrating the mysterious feast of our Lord’s Transfiguration. That word means a change of appearance and refers to what Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell us, that “his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistering.” This happened while Jesus was praying by night on a certain mountain, alone with Peter, James and John.

This vision of Christ in glory (which Peter later insisted was no “cunningly devised fable” but an event to which he was an eye-witness) sounds almost like one of the appearances of the Lord after His resurrection. But all three Synoptic Gospels insist that this took place during the course of His earthly Galilean ministry (just as we celebrate it in the rather dull season of Trinity).

One detail which sets this event apart is that all three Evangelists made an unusual effort to date it within the narrative. Luke says “about eight days after.” After what, we have to ask. The preceding event must be important, since the Gospels are mostly vague about the time-sequence of events.

The Transfiguration follows, after the interval of a week, upon the critical event of Peter’s great confession, which is the hinge episode of the Gospels, the great turning point of Jesus’ ministry before His Passion. “Who do men say that I am? Who do ye say that I am? Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Now, before they have caught their breath, the outspoken Peter and the two ambitious brothers James and John , who aspired to high position in the king-dom, are allowed to see a vision of exactly Who Jesus Is. While this is a momentary change in His appearance, it is no change in His person or nature, but a sudden revelation of His deity, as the eternal Son or Word of the Father.

In this vision He is conversing with two personages of long ago, Moses and Elijah, who represent the Law and the Prophets, the Scriptures of the Old Testament.

Peter (who still has some learning to do) devoutly proposes that they build three tabernacles or booths) in which Jesus, Moses and Elijah might be enshrined. But at that suggestion, Moses and Elijah disappear and Jesus is left alone with His disciples. The heavenly voice repeats the statement uttered at His baptism: “This is my beloved Son,” but adds the command, “hear Him.”

In Jesus Christ, in His humility and His glory, we see Someone far greater than Moses and Elijah or any other “hero of the faith.” He is unique. Therefore in His presence we are commanded to hold our tongues, to give up our own religious ideas, and to obey. LKW

**ST MARY THE VIRGIN**

Although August 15 is not a Prayer Book holy day, it seems hardly credible that we have no feast in honor of the gentle and lovely woman most intimately involved in the Incarnation. From early times, August 15 has been celebrated as her day. It has been marked by various names. The most ancient and universal title for this feast is the Dormition of Our Lady. That is an unfamiliar word which means "falling asleep." It emphasizes that St Mary was not a martyr, as were most of the saints whose feasts are kept in the Prayer Book kalendar.

In more modern times, this day has come to be called the Feast of the Assumption, celebrating a post-Biblical legend that after her death Mary's body did not decompose but was miraculously transported to the heavens. Before we reject this pious opinion too quickly, we must acknowledge that the New Testament gives some tantalizing hints of such a belief. St Paul wrote (I Thess. 4:17) of those who will be "caught up together in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air," and St John penned a majestic description (Rev. 12) of the "woman clothed by the sun." So rather than giving undue honor to the Mother of God, the picture of Mary already in glory shows the ultimate destiny of every Christian. "Be ye faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life" is Christ's promise to her and to us as well.

Even if Scripture is silent concerning the end of Mary's earthly life, the Church has given her the title "Mother of God." That appellation still offends many, just as it offended the heretic Nestorius. He was willing to call her "Mother of Christ," but not "Mother of God." "Mother of God" seems to imply something false, that Mary is the mother of the Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, as if Mary herself were a Goddess from eternity. Such a notion would be beyond heresy, a leap into sheer paganism.

When we say, as we must say, that the Virgin Mary was the Mother of God, we are saying quite emphatically that the One to whom she gave birth was none other than God in the flesh. Her Son Jesus Christ was and is Deity Incarnate. So the title "Mother of God" at bottom line is not a statement about Mary herself but a statement about the One to whom she was Mother.

From the moment she surrendered herself to the Archangels's message ("Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word") until the day of Pentecost when she was occupying an honored place amongi the apostles, we see Mary as the most faithful and obedient disciple, the model for all Christians. Concerning her we sing, "O higher than the cherubim, more glorious than the seraphim, lead their praises; thou bearer of the eternal Word, most gracious, magnify the Lord." LKW

**ST BARTHOLOMEW'S DAY**

The outstanding thing about the holy festival we celebrate today is that we know only one fact about Bartholomew: he was an apostle of Jesus Christ. We do not know even his name for sure. The word “Bartholomew” means only “son of Tolmai.” Perhaps he was the disciple Nathaniel mentioned in John 1:43—51, who asked, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” and of whom Jesus declared, “Behold an Israelite in whom there is no guile!” But that is only a guess, if indeed a very ancient one.

We sometimes speak of the saints as “heroes of the faith.” B

**TRINITY VIII**

During this portion of Trinity Season we have a series of readings from Paul's greatest work, his Letter to the Church in Rome. Before commenting on today's portion, it is necessary to point out that Paul's “letters” were not simply personal correspondence like a letter you or I might write, but were official apostolic letters, intended to be read publicly and received as authoritative. It is altogether appropriate that we call them Paul's “Epistles.”

Today's reading comes from Romans 8, the apex and summit of the entire book. This chapter, as a whole, deals with the doctrine of sanctification, the process in which the pardoned and born-again sinner is gradually and progressively made over into a saint. We all know, as Paul surely knew, that this does not happen instantly! This is a process which goes on through our entire earthly lives (and perhaps even in the next life as well). By experience we know it is not a consistent process, but advances by fits and starts.

This new life-style requires a certain degree of exertion, self-discipline and co-operation on our part. This is why Paul says, “we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.” By “flesh” of course Paul means our old sinful nature, the fallen nature we had before we were reborn. We owe nothing at all to that nature. On the contrary, we are debtors to our new “born-again” nature.

Paul has already told us in this Epistle that for the time being, we are people of two natures simultaneously, which he calls flesh and spirit, the old sinful nature and the new life in the Holy Spirit. Therefore, there is always a tension, a certain degree of conflict between the two natures in the Christian person. This is well expressed in the formula *simul iustus et pecccator*, "a righteous man and a sinner at the very same time." Righteous by virtue of God's decree of pardon and acquittal, sinful by reason of our imperfect sanctification.

A major key word in today's passage is the term “adoption.” When Paul wrote “When we cry, Abba, Father, it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.” Adoption is a fairly common thing in our time, but in Paul's world it was somewhat rare—a legal procedure practically limited to the extremely rich. It purpose was to secure an inheritance to a person unrelated by blood, a person who had no right of inheritance, no valid claim at law.

To become adopted as an incalculable privilege, which entitled the adoptee to numerous privileges. In order to live out the new life we have been granted this gift, a gift so great we might doubt its very reality. Therefore the Spirit Himself—the Third Person of God Himself—assures and reassures us, “bearing witness with our spirit.” LKW

**TRINITY VIII**

On the sixth, seventh and eighth Sundays after Trinity, we have a series of readings from Paul’s longest and greatest Epistle, his letter to the Church in Rome. Paul began this Epistle with a bold and brash statement, “For I am not ashamed of the Gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith.” When Paul boasted “I am not ashamed,” he was in fact saying, “I am proud of the Gospel and delight in proclaiming it.”

Paul could understandably have been ashamed of his message. Paul lived in a Church which had diluted the Gospel of Christ with a seductive message of legalism and moralism, the same false Gospel which is often heard today. Paul was writing to a Church in a city where the Gospel was not likely to be warmly received. Rome was the antithesis of everything the Gospel claims. Whereas Paul preached boldly that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour, Rome had a human ruler who claimed those very titles for himself. No Roman ruler or strong man would be pleased to hear of another man held up as Lord and Saviour. The record tells how Roman emperors dealt with such a message.

Paul’s Gospel was all about Jesus. This Gospel was not a philosophy of life, nor a political program, nor moral advice, nor a self-help program, nor a promise of a prosperous and pain-free life. That is a quick summary of a few alternative Gospels (Paul would say false gospels) on offer today.

Preachers are sometimes criticized for saying the same thing in every Sunday sermon. To such a charge Paul would happily plead guilty. He wrote elsewhere, “for I am determined to know nothing among you, save Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” I saw a pulpit once with a Latin inscription, “nisi Jesum Christum, et illum crucifixum.” That motto was a commitment to preach a Gospel simple, pure and undiluted, the un-mixed good news of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel, in a word, is nothing other than that blessed Name, the name of Jesus. Jesus, Paul preached, was the Son of God, God in the flesh, God among us and God with us. This true Son of God, not only lived with us, but died for us. His disgraceful death was the sacrifice which reconciled us to His Father. Moreover this Jesus was raised from the dead and is now in heaven preparing a place for us. Jesus Himself is Good News for lost and helpless sinners. Jesus Himself is the one Paul was not ashamed of. Jesus is the One of whom Paul could write, “If I boast, I boast in the Lord.”

Let us never be ashamed of the gospel we believe. Let us never be ashamed of the Saviour we proclaim. Let us always be bold in holding Him up as the power of God for our salvation. LKW

**TRINITY IX**

Today's reading from 1 Corinthians is a truly puzzling passage, with its unfamiliar allusions to the Old Testament. It also requires of us a particular way of reading the Old Testament. Paul saw the entire Old Testament as a preparation for Jesus Christ, with Jesus Christ prefigured and foreshadowed on every page. In references which make little sense to us Paul was pointing out that even in the time of Moses, the Exodus from Egypt, and the wanderings in the wilderness, Christ was already present and active, approximately 1500 years before He was born at Bethlehem.

But this amazing blessing did not save them. “But with many of them, God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness.” This, Paul teaches, is a warning to us. If God could be displeased with His people of the Old Testament, His people of the New Testament are subject to the same holy and righteous judgment.

The specific danger which Paul was dealing with was the sin of idolatry. The worship of false gods seemed to be the incorrigible vice of the people whom Moses led out of Egypt and through the wilderness. It remained their besetting sin right up until God finally drove them into their exile. “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” was the commandment most frequently disobeyed.

The Corinthian converts to whom Paul ministered were people who had hardly begun to detach themselves from their pagan culture. If we read just one verse further, he drove home his point: “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.” One could not be a faithful Christian and still retain souvenirs or traces of the pagan gods; saying “Jesus is Lord” means Jesus is exclusively Lord, Lord of all, and we are exclusively His.

When the Old Testament Israelites, after their Babylonian exile, gave up the false gods (idols) of the Egyptians and Canaanites, they quickly found new idols of an immaterial form: their Law, their race, their tradition, their culture. The Greek pantheon which was so strong a temptation for the Corinthians has long since faded from our world. But our culture still provides us with false gods galore.

Pleasure, entertainment, luxury, more money than we really need, popularity, social status, learning, power, privilege, are only a few of the false gods which seek to enslave and destroy us. When God—the only true God—redeemed His people, He demanded their sole and exclusive loyalty and service. He requires no less of us. LKW

**TRINITY IX**

What does the word *prodigal* really mean? Apart from this parable the word has virtually disappeared from our language. Because of the story contained therein, we commonly take the word to mean "wayward, disobedient, ungrateful" and thereby reveal ourselves to be rather like the audience to whom the parable was originally addressed, self-righteous Pharisees and grumbling scribes. Interestingly, the word does not occur in the Biblical text.

*Prodigal*, however, means something rather different. Merriam-Webster defines the word "recklessly extravagant, characterized by wasteful expenditure, lavish." That was the substance of the elder brother's complaint.

Actually, the parable gives us not one but three examples of reckless extravagance. The first, of course, is the younger son you went away to the far country. He has thrown away his inheritance in a depraved manner which is delicately described as "riotous living." He can only correct his mistakes by returning humbly to his father's house. The contemporary heresy of "unconditional love" would rewrite the parable to say he e-mailed his father, "I'm broke, please send some cash." But return home he must.

The elder brother, for all his diligence, and hard work is even more wasteful. Living in proximity to the father ("Son thou art ever with me," truly ironic words!), the mental and spiritual distance between him and the Father seems almost unbridgeable. He has wasted 10,000 opportunities to become his father's friend. They co-exist in the same home but they do not live together. How many dwell in the Lord's house but never know Him?

The most extreme example of prodigality is the conduct of the father himself. Unwisely, in terms of human wisdom, he has made an early pay-ment of an inheritance. Now he provides a lavish and expensive feast celebrating the ne'er-do-well's return, Presumably, he will divide his estate all over again. Not a prodigal son, but a prodigal family!

The parable is Our Lord's rebuke to the self-righteousness of those "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others." But even more, it sets forth the lavish generosity of God toward sinners. We remember Judas Iscariot's complaint against the woman who anointed Jesus for his burial, "Why this waste?" Her action reflected the costly love of God for us, the price with which we were bought, the Divine prodigality which went to the "far country" of the Cross and continues to feed us sinners at the rich and inexhaustible banquet He sets before us. LKW

**TRINITY X**

In today's first reading we continue with I Corinthians, from a passage dealing with spiritual gifts. Paul lists there numerous gifts within the community of the faithful (a community he goes so far as to describe as “the Body of Christ”). But as these various gifts are listed, there is a test implied: gifts which build up the Body of Christ are truly gifts of the Holy Spirit, but any so-called “gifts” which divide or disturb the Body come from a very different source. Paul wishes us to discern carefully those gifts which are truly of the Holy Spirit.

The fundamental gift is the gift of faith. “No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost.” In that sentence Paul was alluding to the earliest form of the Christian Creed, “Jesus is Lord.” It is a breath-taking fact that in certain religious circles this simple affirmation is rejected as a “sexist” statement, the word “Lord” being regarded as insulting or demeaning to females.

But even in Paul's time the word “Lord” was controversial. This word, *Kyrios* in Greek, was the word used to translate “Yahweh” in the Old Testament. When early Christians affirmed as their creed “Jesus is Lord,” they were saying “Jesus is God.” This was exactly the reason that the high priest and Sanhedrin attempted to suppress the preaching of Peter and the Apostles in Acts; the declaration that Jesus is God was outrageous to them.

When the pagan Romans or Greeks heard the word “Kyrios,” they thought of the Roman emperor, who in fact was beginning to call himself Divine. The assertion that “Jesus is Lord” sounded distinctly political, in a subversive sort of way. The emperors were always on the look-out for rivals seeking to dethrone them. A new sect which professed “Jesus is Lord” naturally drew the negative attention of worldly powers.

So the simple Creed of the Christians, offensive to both Jews and Gentiles alike, could never be in Paul's world a sentimental platitude or empty slogan. Declaring the Lordship of Jesus Christ was risking one's life, declaring oneself to be Jesus' slave, placing oneself totally at Jesus' disposal.

That sort of declaration does not come about through cheap emotionalism or by a purely human decision. It comes as the miraculous gift of God the Holy Ghost. All who have faith in Jesus, who are enabled to submit to Him as Lord of their lives, truly have the greatest of all spiritual gifts LKW

**TRINITY X**

Trinity Season is mostly devoted to Our Lord's ministry of teaching, though parables, preaching, and miracles (unlike the other half of the year, which sets forth the mighty deeds of His Incarnation, Passion and Exaltation). Therefore, today's Gospel passage, from Luke 19, coming almost exactly in the middle of the "second semester" is striking because it presents a painful picture from Palm Sunday, Jesus weeping over the city of Jerusalem. So here we have a glimpse back into Holy Week.

Jerusalem, associated with David the King and the Temple he built, is a Biblical symbol of the Church which Our Saviour established to be His Body on earth. But lest we fall into the Old Testament error of seeing our "Jerusalem" in grandiose terms, we have the warning Jesus uttered here. Jerusalem, the Temple, and the Church we cherish as our spiritual Mother, are all under judgment, "because thou knewest not the time of thy visita-tion."

Jerusalem failed to recognize the presence of God, as God was incarnate in Jesus Christ. Matthew tells us that when Jesus had entered into the city, the whole city was stirred up and asked, "Who is this?" Luke relates how He spelled out the tragedy of their ignorance.

Jesus has the habit of coming suddenly and unexpectedly. For all the prophetic preparation God has made, men's hearts are still hard and unready to receive Him. We treat His coming in Word and Sacrament as a routine matter, nothing remarkable. Perhaps we do not expect Him to come at all.

But come He does, in Sermon and Eucharist, and in the face of our neighbor.

Usually this episode is interpreted in terms of the justified anger Jesus felt over the corruption of the Temple (which, by the way), He claimed as "my house." Luke, however, stresses not anger but grief. Jesus approaching the holy city weeps over it. We are told elsewhere in Luke (13:34) that on another occasion He said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those that are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not." This anguished disappointment of Jesus was later mentioned in Hebrews 5:7, "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death."

He still loves us, as much as He loved Jerusalem and as much as He loved the temple "where He taught daily." Pray that He will not weep over us for not knowing the time of our visitation, the moment of His presence. LKW

**TRINITY XI**

Today we read from one of the greatest and most powerful chapters of the NT, 1 Corinthians 15, the “Resurrection chapter.” This chapter is the first selection appointed for reading in the Burial Office (BCP p. 328) and is also the source for the final portion of the Easter canticle (p. 163).

It seems truly strange that even in St. Paul's lifetime, before the NT was completely written, the resurrection of our Saviour was already a matter of dispute. “Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?” (verse 12). Paul does not say “some among them” (the unbelievers) but rather “some among you,” professing Christians and members of the Church. The Christian Church has always had the problem of unbelief within its own ranks.

In Jesus' lifetime, the major difference between the two principal sects of Judaism, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, was belief in the resurrection at the last day. Even before Christ, the Pharisees affirmed it and the Sadducees denied it. (While the Pharisees disputed with Him, it was the Sadducees who were most eager to see Him crucified.) And of course the pagan Gentiles did not believe in a resurrection either, looking for no more than “passing away into a better place.”

This Sadducee attitude, combined with the vague notions of the Gentiles regarding immortality, had somehow penetrated the Christian community. There were those willing to say “Jesus is Lord” who had not fully come to terms with His empty tomb. Like many so-called Christians today, they would agree that Jesus was raised, but could not conceive that a real resurrection awaits the entire human race.

The Christian message is not one of vague wistful hopes of intangible immortality. Our Gospel is one of complete victory over sin, death, and hell. The victory over sin was established at the cross. The victory over death and hell was established at the empty tomb. This is idle claim, no mere doctrine, but a fact of space-time history, guaranteed by numerous eye-witnesses. Another fact of space time history awaits us all at the End--our own empty tombs.

What difference does it all make? St Paul expresses that bluntly in the opening verse of the chapter: “the gospel which I preach unto you ... by which ye are saved...” If our dear Lord had not left that tomb, but only continued to exist in some flimsy half-life, then we would be truly wretched creatures, still lost, defeated, imprisoned in our sins. “But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” LKW

**TRINITY XI**

The key word in today's Gospel is the word *justified,* but we will come back to that. If you or I had written this parable, it would surely have had a different conclusion from the one our Lord gave to it.

We would possibly have said that the Pharisee was justified and the Publican was rejected. The Pharisee was a thoroughly decent man. He was truly an asset to his community, the sort of man who would be welcome anywhere. We would surely be happy to have him in our church--a man who is there every time the doors are open and, most importantly a man who tithes.

Or we might have said, "there is room for both kinds in our temple." It is an important detail that these two men, who represent two diametrically opposite perspectives, two irreconcilable religions, were praying at the same time and in same place, supposedly to the same god. We are charmed by the notions of tolerance, inclusiveness, getting along and living together in one big tent. So we are tempted to say to the Pharisee, "Try to be more tolerant of the Publican," and then to the Publican, "Try to imitate the Pharisee." We like "both/and" thinking and get nervous with the Gospel's "either/or."

Or we might have said, "We like the Pharisee as he is, and will give the Publican a chance to reform himself." In other words, we would accept him

**ST JAMES THE APOSTLE**

When we go looking into today's Gospel from Matt. 20 for a sermon, we are confronted by an embarrassment of riches. Here is a story of two disciples, with their mother in tow, asking for special privilege and status in the kingdom Jesus was soon to inaugurate. The request might not be as pre-sumptuous as it appears. There are clues which suggest that the mother of James and John was a sister of the Blessed Mother and therefore Jesus' aunt. That would make James and John the cousins of Jesus. Family ties were important in that age and the request would not seem out of order to them.

But here are some of the issues which emerge in the passage. First, the sinful desire for rank and power in God's kingdom That is hardly a thing of the past. Ambition for office and influence plagues the Church in every place and time, at every level from parish to diocese to province and even to the ends of the earth. Whereas Matthew and Mark tell this story, Luke does not. Instead he told a more shocking incident in which the Twelve, gathered in the Upper Room on the night of the betrayal, only hours before the crucifixion itself, squabble and quarrel over "who should be the greatest."

Second, the timing of the incident shows the shallowness and insensitivity of Christians to the way of the cross which Jesus has taken. Our reading begins at verse 20. This follows the third great prediction of the passion, in which Jesus had said, "and they shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify, and the third day he shall rise again."

Do we hear only the final part of that prophecy? The happy indifference to our Lord's agony for us probably explains our preference for a "beautiful" and "glorious" cross to the wooden crucifix which confronts us with His pain. But the incident in today's Gospel reading is so embarrassing (to James and John and to us well) that we know it must have really happened. Anyone who invented such a tale would be guilty of slander.

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