



40th European Meeting of Young Adults

The First to Serve

The mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. "What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can", they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father." When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

(Matthew 20:20–28)

Meditation for November (No. 4)

According to this passage, the spirit of competition, the desire to be the first and the best, is not merely a modern phenomenon. Is there something in human beings that seeks after honors, that wants to have the first place? Here of course it is the mother of James and John who tries to get a privilege for her sons, but this is an old trick: it is easier to ask for something for others, so that then we ourselves can bask in the reflected glory. Jesus at any rate is not fooled: he speaks directly to the two sons.

An economy is based on the spirit of competition. We are taught from an early age that we have to be better than the others. Such a system inevitably produces winners and losers and, if left unchecked, over time there are fewer and fewer winners and more and more losers.

Although a healthy competition can liberate people's energy and reveal their gifts, in the long run it leads inevitably to divisions, and even to violence. In this story, we see that immediately the other disciples are angry with James and John. The community risks being torn apart.

Jesus then shows them a completely different way of living. He banishes all thought of honors and rewards. He asks the two disciples, rather, if they can drink the cup he will drink. In the ancient world, the cup was a symbol of destiny. As applied to Jesus, it refers not to a blind fate but to the mission entrusted to him by his Father: to give his life so that others might live.

Jesus then applies this teaching to life, which tells us that the group of disciples do not just form a community, but that Jesus sees this community — a restored Israel — as an alternative to the political relationships in the pagan world. There, the leaders enjoy exercising their power over others. Among the disciples, the greatest and the first are in fact the last — those who serve.

By this reversal, Jesus liberates our desire to be the best and the first by putting it in the service not of our egos but of others. Striving to be the first in helping others, in serving them: that is healthy competition. As Saint Paul says, "You should consider others as better than yourselves, not looking to your own interests but to those of others" (Philippians 2:3-4). Such a spirit of humility and sharing is what makes true community possible.

And this is only possible if our image of God is transformed. Jesus shows us a God who does not glory in being the first and the greatest, who does not see his divinity as a privilege, but lowers himself out of love, taking the last place so that others may rise.

Questions for sharing in small groups

- ▶ What is the goal of my studies or work?
- ▶ How can I place my gifts at the service of others?
- ▶ What steps would be necessary to turn our churches and our societies into true communities of sharing?