

## What goes up, must come down

October 17, 2021 - Proper 24, Year B (BCP)

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

Fr. Patrick Raymond

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. Isaiah 53:4-7

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." Mark 10:35-45

Assist us mercifully, O Lord, in these our supplications and prayers, and dispose the way of your servants towards the attainment of everlasting salvation; that, among all the changes and chances of this mortal life, they may ever be defended by your gracious and ready help; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. - Collect for Protection, Book of Common Prayer, p. 832

This past week, Captain James T. Kirk finally, actually made it into space. It was not the fictional Captain Kirk of Star Trek fame; nor was he aboard the Starship Enterprise. It was William Shatner, the actor best known as Captain Kirk from Star Trek. He was one of four passengers aboard a rocket launched in rural West Texas, just before 11 a.m. Wednesday.

Parts of William Shatner's flight into space inspired me. He's 90-years-old! Parts of the story have preoccupied and disturbed me. I was seven when the first Star Trek series aired. I've seen enough since then to have absorbed into my generational imagination the premise of interstellar space travel. Part of me has always taken for granted that Captain Kirk was always out there somewhere, *going boldly where others have never gone before*.

But of course William Shatner had never before actually been to space. All those years, he had only been acting, playing a part. He was so convincing! The disturbed part of me has wondered since Wednesday about my own story, my own faith. How often or for how long have I only been playing a role? How often have I as priest, preacher and Christian talked of going boldly in faith where others dared not go? How often has it been only a flight of the imagination, a fiction, acting?

A similar pessimism arose in me as I contemplated this morning's text from the Gospel of Mark: the Apostles James and John cheekily ask Jesus if they can sit at his right and left hand in glory. What hubris! Maybe they're not *real* disciples. Maybe they've only been acting all this time.

I suppose James and John could partly be excused because, unlike William Shatner before this past Wednesday, they had already seen a glimpse of the heavens. In the immediately prior chapter of Mark, we learned that James and John were among the select few taken up to the mountaintop

where Jesus had been dazzlingly transfigured, visited by Moses and Elijah. (Mark 9:2-7) Naturally James and John wanted more! Having seen Christ's divine and eternal being, they wanted to be and to stay as close as possible: 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.'

But that's a generous interpretation of their point of view and motives. After that mountaintop experience and immediately prior to today's passage is a gruesome, somber prophesy of Jesus: "He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him: '... the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death ... mock him ... flog him, and kill him ...' (Mark 10:32b-34) Was this really the right time for James and John, or any real follower of Jesus, to ask for a preferential promotion?

I was amazed to learn that William Shatner's flight into space this past Wednesday took only about ten minutes – ten minutes from the launch, past earth's atmosphere to the edge of space, and then back down to landing in in the West Texas desert. Ten minutes. Some of Shatner's remarks upon his return were predictably enthusiastic: "It was unbelievable," he said; "... to see the blue color (of the sky) whip by you and now you're staring into blackness ... It was so moving." But then came a line that has stayed with me: "I hope I never recover from this."

I suppose he meant that he hoped he would not recover from the marvel, the awe, the vastly greater perspective there at the edge of the infinite and eternal. Some of us may have felt that same hope, that same resolution, in the context of our religious highs, those moments or seasons when we imagine we've been launched into the greater presence of the Holy One. We felt magnanimous. We imagine unlimited possibilities. The sky's the limit. *I hope I never recover from this.*

But then we fall back to earth. The gravitational pull of our human needs and wants and our vulnerability overcomes our sense of invincibility. Once again we are angling for security, recognition and respect. We can hear some of that in the inquiry made to Jesus by James and John, and before we heard it, their fellow disciples heard it: '... they began to be angry with James and John.' They sensed the hubris, and the disconnect between all they've so far learned and seen in Jesus, not to mention the bad timing. Jesus, the lamb *being led to slaughter* and to be *crushed for our iniquities*, responds to James and John by telling them that there are and will be no guarantees about divine placement, but there will certainly be no glory without prior suffering and serving in faith.

Had I been James or John, I may have felt like a failure, even shamed out of the Jesus mission. But they appear to have taken the words of Jesus to heart and carried on. James later became the first of the apostles to be martyred. (Acts 12:2) John stood at the foot of the cross as Jesus was crucified. He later wrote the Gospel that bears his name and that opens by giving us the most awe-inspiring view of the place of Jesus, Son of God, divine Logos, in all of creation. 'and we have beheld his glory ...' (John 1:14b)

In her brief remarks at the ordinations here yesterday, Bishop Knudsen recognized how Mother Murphy-Gill and Mother Lagman and many others felt as if we were taking part in the successful and awe-inspiring launch of a journey that had been so many years in the forming and planning and anticipation. The bishop also prepared and cautioned us, saying, and I paraphrase 'This may feel like the culmination, and in some ways it is, but it also only a beginning.' She briefly reminded us that the formation of gifted, willing and able priests relies in part on perseverance and care and support by entire parish communities. The same is true, of course, with regard to the formation of any gifted and willing and able Christian.

I believe the bishop may have been emphasizing what is also an appropriate take-away from this morning's gospel story. Our Christian faith should certainly be shaped and inspired by what we saw on the mountaintop, those occasional, fleeting glimpses from the rim of eternity. But what goes up must come down. And over the long haul, our faith will be measured by what we do upon our return to earth, how, *among all the changes and chances of this mortal life*, we are or are not willing to come down, to continue serving, and, yes, sometimes sacrificing and suffering, in faith. Amen.