

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time • B

Christ the King • October 17-18, 2009 • ACA Commitment Sunday

Maybe I have watched too many Old Western movies, but I would like to ride in a stagecoach. I know that it wouldn't be as comfortable or convenient as our cars today, but it would be an adventure. Did you know that the stagecoach companies sold three different classes of tickets, first-, second- and third-class?

If you bought a first-class ticket, you retained the right to remain seated during the entire trip, regardless of the circumstances. If the stagecoach got stuck in the mud or had difficulty climbing a hill or if a wheel fell off or an axle broke, you could remain seated. First-class had its privileges.

If you purchased a second-class ticket, you could also remain seated until and unless there were a problem. In that case, second-class ticket holders would be required to get off the coach until the problem was resolved.

If, however, you held a third-class ticket, you would definitely have to get off if there were a problem. Why? Third-class ticket holders were responsible for helping fix the problem. They were required to do whatever was necessary to help the trip continue. Third-class passengers were compelled into service, anything from pushing or pulling a stuck wagon, repairing broken wheels or axles and even to tending the horses.

You may be wondering how this colorful bit of history relates to today's Gospel. Jesus and his disciples are also traveling. On their way, Jesus has been instructing them in the blessings as well as the demands of discipleship. He was very honest, speaking more of service and suffering and less of power, prestige and honor. Jesus alludes to the inevitable conflict and struggle he will face in fulfilling his God-given mission. He sees his role as the suffering servant we heard about in the first reading. Yet despite all his talk and his example, we see that his disciples still don't get it. James and John want to enjoy the privilege of traveling with him by holding first-class tickets.

By saying that they want to be seated at Jesus' right and left, they assume that Jesus too would be riding first-class into glory. They misunderstand what it means to share Jesus' cup and bath; thinking of these as sharing in his kingdom. Confidently they say, "Yes, we can!"

It might be easy for us to make fun of these disciples for their total lack of understanding. But do we really know and accept the cost of discipleship? We start out well, with the enthusiasm of first-class ticket holders. Yet when the cup turns bitter and the bath becomes an immersion in sacrifice ... when our third-class ticket status requires that we give up our seats and plunge wholeheartedly into fixing what needs to be fixed, mending what is broken and reconciling that which has become alienated, we balk.

Like James and John and the other disciples, do we fully comprehend the paradoxical role of the servant-leader. Jesus never presumes first-class status. Jesus' path is to be ours. Serving the needs of all, he always opts for the third-class ticket, giving himself fully and freely to the work of our salvation.

This work continues and is now our responsibility too; until all know themselves to be saved, forgiven, ransomed, and redeemed. It is our daily challenge to accept the third-class status that Jesus has elevated to holiness.

Based on "Third-Class, All the Way," in Celebration, October 2006, pp. 41-42.