

SERMON NOTES

Sunday Preceding Christmas

Synaxis Gospel

Luke 22:24-30

THE GREAT DISCIPLES

INTRODUCTION

The setting is the Last Supper. It is a time of deep emotion for Jesus. Jesus will be arrested, tried and crucified before noon the next day. He has just blessed the bread and the wine and given it to His disciples. He has explained what the bread and wine signify and commanded them to eat and drink in remembrance of Him. Finally He has announced that one who would betray Him is with Him at the table.

This news causes the disciples to discuss which one of them might do such a thing. This discussion degenerates into a dispute about their merits, probably of loyalty to Jesus. In a few moments Peter would swear that he was ready to go both to prison and to death for Jesus' sake.

SYNAXIS READING

Luke 22:24-30

And there arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest.

And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.'

But not so with you, but let him who is the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as the servant.

For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves.

And you are those who have stood by Me in my trials; and just as My Father has granted Me a kingdom, I grant you that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

NOTES

And there arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest.

What was the cause of the dispute? Perhaps Jesus' statement that one would betray Him.

This discussion had also occurred earlier (Luke 9:44-48) in a similar context: there, Jesus had just told them that He was going to be delivered into the hands of men. Immediately afterwards, this same debate about who was the greatest had broken out among them. The question in Luke 9 is posed with a Greek optative: "Who would be the greatest (if they could know who)." At that time Jesus had set a child next to him as an example of greatness in the Kingdom of God. Here at the Last Supper, Jesus used a different example of greatness.

Considered the greatest by whom? By Jesus?

"Regarded" is the translation of δοκεῖα. It is a 3rd person singular present active indicative verb with the nuances of 'to think,' 'to suppose,' and 'to seem.'

Let us assume that the disciples meant: who would Jesus say is the greatest disciple? "Who does He think to be the greatest?"

And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.'

Jesus answers their question.

Examples of those who were considered great by men were the "kings of the Gentiles." They "lorded it over" their subjects, they dominated them. Ironically, these princes were titled "Benefactors" which literally means "those who treat well." This was a title of honor given by those who were grateful to the ruler for a building project or public work that benefited the city. However, these building projects came at a heavy price to the people in terms of exorbitant taxation and forced labor.

Even a ruler of the Jews was given the title 'Benefactor.' Herod the Great was a cruel king, but he was also a great builder (including the Temple of the Jews of Jesus' day.) There is a stone inscription written in Greek "year 32 of Herod, Benefactor, friend of Caesar."¹

But not so with you, but let him who is the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as the servant.

The disciples are not to be as the kings of the Gentiles—lording it over those they rule over. Instead they are to assume the role of the least significant, and of the servant.

The 'greatest' was the honored ruler.

The "youngest" in that society was obliged to perform the lowliest service.

**For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table, or the one who serves?
Is it not the one who reclines at the table?**

The expected answer is yes. The one who is served at the table is greater than the one who serves.

¹ Alan Ralph Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus (The Biblical Seminar 69)* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) p.109, fig. 20.

But I am among you as the one who serves.

But what one would normally expect is not true in the case of Jesus and the disciples. Jesus is their leader and is actually the greatest, but He has taken a servant's role for them.

Jesus is their example of greatness, not the rulers of the nations.

And you are those who have stood by Me in my trials;

Jesus now turns to the subject of what He thinks of them.

The disciples did not desert Him during His years of ministry when He was tested. Jesus notes that they "stood by Me."

"In My trials" may refer to a time of testing. Jesus was the Passover Lamb. In Exodus, the lamb had to be physically perfect and was watched for 3 and ½ days to make sure it was a proper sacrifice. It is thought that the period of Jesus' public ministry was 3 years or so, judging by the holidays mentioned in the Gospels. During this period He was tested by Satan and came under the scrutiny of the religious leaders. None of them could convict Him of sin. He was the perfect, sinless man. The disciples had witnessed those years and had stood by Him.

and just as My Father has granted Me a kingdom,

"And I" is emphatic. This literally reads: "**And I** appointed to you, just as My Father appointed to Me a kingdom, that you may eat and you may drink at my table in My kingdom,"

"Granted" is a translation of διατίθειμαι which has the nuance of 'appointed.'

"Me a Kingdom" refers to the fact that Jesus is the Son of God, the anointed King of the Kingdom.

I grant you that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom,

"I grant you," as shown above, is first in the statement and is emphatic.

To eat and drink at the king's table is a sign of high honor and importance to the king. These disciples in Jesus' estimation are of high importance in the kingdom. He has appointed them to be so honored in the future kingdom that they will eat and drink "at My table in My kingdom."

"In My kingdom" may be referring to the reign of Christ on the earth when He returns at the Second Advent, and which will last for a thousand years before the final judgment.

and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

The disciples will be those ruling in Jesus' kingdom over their ethnic nation.

"The twelve tribes of Israel" may mean those descendants of Abraham's grandson, Jacob, who will be in the kingdom of Jesus. Possibly this could mean that the disciples will judge those of Israel who rejected the Savior.

APPLICATION

New Year's Day is a new and fresh start. We look back at our lives during the past year and resolve to improve in some way. It is a time of reflection and planning, a time of hopeful expectation, of a brighter future.

On this Sunday anticipating the coming New Year, our Synaxis reading focuses our thoughts on the Last Supper and the evening before the Crucifixion of our Lord. Until

this night, the Passover had been a supper of remembrance of God's great deliverance of His people from the slavery of Egypt. It was an evening of reflection on the goodness and grace of God in the past. Jesus now made the supper a remembrance of an even greater deliverance, the deliverance of God's people from their sins. He would accomplish this great deliverance before the sun set on the following day.

Jesus also looked ahead to the future. In one way it was a painful look. One of His chosen disciples would betray Him and die forever separated from Him. Jesus would have forgiven Judas, but Judas would not ask Him for forgiveness. Another would break under the pressure of the next few hours and would deny Him three times. The next three days would be the most difficult days of His disciples' lives. Without Him they would be frightened and despondent, without hope because they had shut their ears not only to His warnings of His approaching death but also of His promise of Resurrection.

But in another way it was a joyful look into the future. He saw the results of His Crucifixion. He saw the untold millions who would be restored to God through faith in Him and His finished work on the Cross. He knew that His Resurrection would give his disciples the hope in Him that would forever change their lives. They would become the great men they so aspired to be. Jesus looked at them that night and saw them as they would be—great, because they would become servants of all mankind. Despite persecution, poverty and death, they would bring the message of the Gospel to all nations. They would carry the news of His saving death and Resurrection to the ends of the earth.

Jesus saw all of this but He only told them the end of the story. In the future Kingdom they would dine at His table; in the future they would be enthroned rulers. What did Jesus think of them? He knew they would be great because they would stoop to become servants, as He had done for the salvation of mankind.

As we reflect on our past and plan for the future, what do we see? If we, like the disciples before the Resurrection, have stumbled around, not quite getting it, trying our best but still failing, will we see a positive difference this next year? Will we find the strength, the hope, that will forever change our lives so that in the future we too will dine at the King's table?

The greatest Servant of all, Jesus Christ our Lord, is calling us to look back again at His Resurrection. What does it mean? How did it change the frightened disciples into great men of faith? By the Resurrection, God proved that Jesus was everything He claimed to be before the Crucifixion, God in human form. By the Resurrection, God proved that Jesus had fully paid our sin penalty for us. Death, the penalty for sins, could no longer hold Him. He is alive forevermore!

This is reality! The disciples finally understood that all that they had dreamed of was very small in light of being with Him and like Him. This experience was not some fuzzy ethereal thing, some dreamlike otherworldliness. Something for someone we think of as very saintly, remote from us in the real world. No! The disciples were everyday people

and this experience is for us everyday people. We are called to believe what is real. Jesus is alive today and He is God. When that fact fully impacts us as the truth it is, when the realization of His great love for us floods our being, we too will be transformed like the disciples of old. Our faith and hope will be in Him. His Holy Spirit will empower us to not only improve our lives over last year's, but He will enable us to be truly all that Jesus wants us to be—His disciples, His great ones. May the New Year be that great beginning.