



Things to Ponder

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Go Third Class

By Rev. Msgr. Kevin T. Hart

When it comes to airlines, you know that you have three choices: first class, business class and economy class. But do you know that in the days of the Wild West stagecoaches also offered three classes of seating?

Riding a stagecoach with a first-class ticket meant that you could keep your seat and stay in the coach for the entire trip. If the stagecoach ran into trouble, say a broken wheel or axle, or a steep grade to climb, or deep mud to get through, first-class passengers did not have to leave the coach. They could stay in it and not have to help in any way to fix a wheel or mend an axle. You did not have to get out of the coach on a steep grade so as to lighten the load, and certainly not lend a hand in pushing the coach. First-class then, as now, is privileged seating.

A second-class ticket holder was required to leave the coach if it ran into any of these difficulties, but he did not have to lend a hand in any way to remedy the problem, even just to tend the horses. If you had a third class ticket, you might have to sit in the cold and rain next to the driver. And if you were lucky enough to sit in the coach, not only did you have to leave it when trouble arose, but you had to lend a hand and your muscle to get the coach moving again. You'd have to get down in the mud to loosen a wheel, lift the coach to repair a broken axle, and push or drag the coach up a steep incline.

In today's Gospel (Mark 10:35-45 or Mark 10:42-45) Jesus and His disciples are traveling southward from Caesarea Phillipi to Jerusalem. Along the way Jesus has been instructing them in the rigors and dangers of discipleship. He speaks in terms of suffering and service and not in terms of rank or prestige. Jesus sees Himself through the eyes of Isaiah in our first reading (Isaiah 53:10-11): a suffering servant; and anyone who would be His disciple has to be willing to serve and suffer for others.

But all of this just flies over the heads of two of Jesus' disciples, the sons of Zebedee, James and John. They ask for the privileged seats next to Jesus. In short, they want to travel first-class; they want to enjoy the honor and being with Jesus, and not experience the trials and rigors of discipleship that Jesus has been focusing on. They misunderstand what it means to share Jesus' cup and baptism. Jesus is talking about the cup as He did in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before He died. Father, take this cup of suffering away from me. By His baptism He is referring to the baptism of

blood He will receive during His passion and death.

The misunderstanding by James and John prompts us to question whether we truly understand the cost of discipleship with Jesus. We too at times want to travel the road of discipleship with first-class tickets. We enjoy the peace that comes with prayer; we look forward to eternal peace in heaven. But when the cup of discipleship turns bitter; when the bath becomes an immersion in suffering and sacrifice; when our third-class tickets require that we have to give up our seats and plunge wholeheartedly into fixing what needs to be fixed, mending what is broken, and reconciling those we have alienated; when these things happen, we balk.

Like James and John, we have yet to fully comprehend the paradoxical role of the Jesus as Lord and Servant. Never one to presume first-class ticket status, Jesus struck the path that His disciples were to follow. Serving the needs of all, He always opted for a third-class ticket, giving Himself fully and freely to the work of our salvation.

This work continues and is the proper responsibility of Jesus' disciples until all sinners know themselves to be saved, forgiven, ransomed, and redeemed. To that end, it remains our challenge to daily stay the course and, on this side of the grave to accept the third-class status that Jesus Himself elevated to holiness, so that when we reach the eternal life He will take those third-class tickets and redeem them for first-class.

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