

“Are you awake?” “Are you having fun yet?” “Do you have to do that?” They come at you when you least expect it: The stupid question. We could call it the clueless question or annoying question but it all the same thing. How do you react to “the stupid question” may be one of the gages of how mature you have become. Lots of people like “dear Abby” or “miss Manners” have suggestions for dealing with the problem. The gospel shows us how Jesus dealt with it.

“Master, could you do us a favor?” asks the disciples. As is common to the Gospel of Mark, the disciples don’t seem to have a clue as to what’s going on. By this point, after following Jesus for a few years, they should know that Jesus is the chosen one of God. But instead of agreeing to take up their cross and follow him -- as Jesus just instructed them -- they ask for a favor.

And not just any favor – they are basically saying “Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask of you.” Its just like when one of your kids says, “Before I ask you this, you got to promise not to get mad – you already know you won’t like what comes next. Now, James and John have already been informed that they cannot be Jesus’ chief disciples. But still clueless they proceed to ask the stupid question: How about sitting on your right and left when this is all over and you are in charge. Basically they ask, “If we are the first ones to ask, can we be first in the kingdom?”

Jesus had every reason to be angry with them. And we know that he does get angry. But instead he tries to teach them something about **how** to follow him, and maybe show us how we all should deal with difficult people. Instead of telling them how stupid their question was, Jesus chooses to deal with the deeper issue: **They don't really know what they are asking.** Are they willing to experience everything that he is about to experience? Drink from his cup, share his baptism of blood?

Unfortunately James and John still get it wrong. They think he means some sort of glorious reward and they definitely want to share in that. But that isn't what he is talking about. He calmly tells them that they will share his fate, but it will be a painful one. He concludes by describing what is really at stake: "whoever wants to be first, must be the servant of all."

He takes their confused ideas and tries to point them toward the truth. He moves them along in their journey; he gives us a model for dealing with difficult people. He doesn't excuse their selfishness -- he doesn't dismiss what they did because they had an overprotective mother or a difficult childhood. He **doesn't reject** them either. He gently tries to show them the truth. His model is an attitude of truthful charity that seeks a conversion to a fuller view of the situation.

Have you heard the beautiful children's story about the three trees? The trees were talking in the forest one day about their dreams for the future. The first tree said it would like to be made into a cradle,

so that it might go on living as a support for the fragile life of a tiny new baby. The second tree wanted to be made into a big ship, so that it might go on living, carrying important cargo and influential people to exotic new lands. The third tree longed to stay right where it was, existing only as a tree, but growing ever taller, and pointing ever higher, to remind everyone that there is a God in heaven who loves them. Those were their dreams: One wanted to be a cradle, one wanted to be a mighty ship, and one wanted to be a tall tree, pointing people toward God.

But then one day the woodcutters came and chopped down the three trees...and apparently destroyed their dreams. The first tree was not made into a cradle, but into a simple feeding trough for animals. But it was sold to a family in Bethlehem, and on the night Jesus was born, that simple feed box became the cradle for the Christ Child.

The second tree was built into a boat, but not the kind it had dreamed of--not a mighty ocean-going vessel--but a tiny inexpensive fishing boat. A man named Simon Peter bought the boat, and on one warm afternoon when the crowds pressed in, Jesus himself climbed aboard that small fishing boat that he might preach good news to the multitudes.

The third tree also was deprived of its dream. It wanted to remain standing tall and pointing toward God. Instead, it was cut down and shaped into a horrible instrument of torture, a cross. But it was on that very cross that Jesus was crucified, transforming a symbol of cruelty into a powerful reminder of God's

eternal love for all the people. Things didn't go the way the trees imagine them but they worked out better than they could ever have planned it. That's the way it works: When we give ourselves, our plans, to God, our Lord can do great things through us and for us--greater than we can ever imagine.

The disciples in Mark's gospel are always pretty slow to figure things out, but they do keep following Jesus. Their relationship with Jesus isn't perfect, but it isn't broken and it can continue to grow. Our own relationship with Jesus is about the same. Don't most of us pray best when we want some favor of God? "Master, let me ask you a little favor.." isn't that honestly how most of our prayers begin. That is not the ideal relationship to have with him. But he will accept it and try to transform it.

This notion of transforming ourselves and others is at the very heart of the church's mission. So maybe when it comes to the lord there really are no "stupid questions" as long as we are ready to be led to an answer that won't be the one we expected, an answer that will draw us deeper into the mystery of following the lord.

I saw a quote that claimed, "everybody wants to BE somebody, but no one wants to BECOME somebody." The gospel reverses that entirely. We will never BE the lord, but our journey is to become more like him, so that we can share his cup and live his life.