

- In late 1987, two American college students were exploring the jungles of Columbia. After obtaining a canoe, they embarked upon the Putumayo River and strayed into territory held by a Marxist rebel army. Formally known as FARC, these guerrilla soldiers abducted the students and held them captive for ten months in various jungle camps. *By chance*, I met the parents of one of them *about a month after* their capture.
- At first, the FARC guerrillas thought the two men were CIA agents, though the students soon corrected this. *But then* their captors came to see them as hostages with economic value. Soon, their parents hired an American explorer, who found the hostages and their captors. *After four months of negotiations*, conducted by a Roman Catholic Bishop, the students were released and taken to the American Embassy in Bogata.<sup>1</sup>
- For privacy and security, the family did not publicize the terms of release for the young explorers. But I believe it involved the payment of money, probably a *lot* of it. Ransom is a way to describe this kind of payment, where something valuable is exchanged for the freedom of captives. I have put a copy of John Everett Millais' painting, *The Ransom*, with your worship bulletin. In it, we see an artist's rendering of such an exchange, where a father hands over of fistful of jewelry to some men who have taken his daughters hostage. Revolutionaries and criminals have long used ransom as an efficient means of fund-raising, especially when their captives come from wealthy families or are politically well-connected. Google "hostage ransom" and you will find numerous cases.
- Clearly, when payments are made to captors, the purpose is *not to honor or reward the hostage-takers*, even if providing money reinforces the logic of hostage-taking. Instead, these payments reflect an abiding concern for those who are held-captive, awaiting redemption. We find a more recent example of this in the ransom of the journalist, Amanda Lindhout, who was

kidnapped in Somalia in 2008. The owner of the *Calgary Flames* hockey team, *who did not know Amanda*, was moved to pay around \$750,000 to secure her freedom.<sup>2</sup>

- These contemporary examples of ransom are from a *secular* context. Yet, the concept of *ransom* is deeply rooted in our Judeo-Christian tradition, and it shapes how we understand *redemption*. A much-loved Advent hymn begins this way: "O come, O come, Emmanuel, and *ransom captive Israel...*"<sup>3</sup> In the Old Testament, *God's promises inspire hope for the possibility of ransom, while God's judgment warns of withholding ransom*. The Psalmist *sings the hope*, "that God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol..." And the prophet Hosea *speaks the threat*: "Shall I ransom them from... Death? ... Compassion is *hidden* from my eyes."<sup>4</sup>
- *All this helps us understand Jesus' words about ransom in our Gospel today. Context is important*. Immediately prior to this, in Mark, Jesus for the *third time* predicts his suffering and death. *But his disciples still do not understand*. Then, in today's story, James and John *put themselves forward* as leaders. They *presume* to ask Jesus if they can sit *with him in his glory*. But *they misperceive the purpose of the kingdom for which Jesus' mission is the vanguard*. Eagerly, they provide assurance about things they misperceive. In fact, *they remain captive* to a limited and earthly concept of Jesus' ministry, and the *end* toward which it moves. The jealous anger of the other disciples reflects the same limitation. So *Jesus must once again teach all of them* about *humility*, about *deference* to others and a *willingness to be a servant to everyone*.
- As Jesus tells them, "the Son of Man came *not to be served* but to serve, and to give his life a *ransom for many*." Here we must carefully parse his words. For there is *not just one*, but *several ways of understanding Jesus' saving work*.<sup>5</sup> Yet, *for many of us, one such understanding eclipses the others*.

- Influenced by *St. Anselm*, many Christians think of Jesus' saving work mainly in a *legal* or *juridical* way. Our sin, from the first human beings onwards, involves a *degree of corruption and guilt so thorough* it's *beyond* our ability to make right. And so, *in this juridical way of thinking, human captivity to sin means that "a penalty must be paid, and punishment meted out."* By this reckoning, *only a 'sinless one' could pay the uncountable price*, and bear the penalty *for all*. Therefore, *Christ as a substitute for us, paid the price and endured the punishment* so that we, ourselves, *don't* have to. But notice ~ *according to this theory, the 'price' paid was to satisfy God's justice!*
- We can connect this '*punishment-substitution*' understanding of Jesus' saving work with our reading from Isaiah.<sup>6</sup> But *this legal interpretation of Jesus' death* did not become widespread *for at least a thousand years* after his crucifixion. *Instead*, during the first millennium of the Christian era, *another and different* concept of *Jesus' mission* was prominent. *This other view springs directly from the ransom words of our Gospel text*, as well as from 1st Timothy. As Paul writes, "...there is ... one mediator between God and human kind, Christ Jesus... who gave himself [as] *a ransom for all*."<sup>7</sup>
- *According to this ransom view*, ever since Creation, *we have placed ourselves* in the hands of the Enemy, by *refusing* to 'delight in God's will or walk in God's ways.' In effect, *we have strayed into 'the jungles of sin,' and have allowed ourselves to be taken hostage by the Enemy. We are held captive by our sin and by our propensity to follow our own will*. Now, like the two student hostages, *we might have 'paid' our way to freedom ~ if only we and they had had the means to do so. But we and they did not*.<sup>8</sup> And so, showing his great love for us, and reflecting *our value* in God's eyes, *Jesus offered himself to the Enemy, as the ransom for our freedom*. Just as we saw in the examples of the hostages in Columbia and in Somalia, *Jesus made no effort to honor or reward the hostage-taker. Instead, he allowed the Enemy to take him, as someone of even greater value than all of us*. For the Enemy

received *as a ransom* the sinless One, God's own son. Here, the '*price to be paid*' was a *concession* to the power of an enemy, and *compensation* for a loss, *rather than* (as in the later view) a *payment to satisfy God's sense of justice*.

- From the *Enemy's* point of view, there was *only one* thing *better* than *having all of us captive* to the power of death; it was *having Jesus captive*, and *dead*. But *this proved an empty victory*. For what the *Enemy could not foresee was what Jesus' subsequent resurrection* would accomplish. It would be like the hostages' parents writing ransom checks to the FARC guerrillas, *but writing them with disappearing ink!* Upon payment, the *ransomed hostages would be released*; *yet* the captors would later have *nothing to show for it*. Jesus' resurrection from an *empty tomb* accomplished the *same* thing.
- And so, we pay attention to how *God ransomed us from captivity*. As we do, we focus on how much our Creator and Redeemer loves *us*. For God has ransomed captive Israel. And *having been ransomed by love*, our hearts are *turned toward the shared gift we have received*. We are then moved to *serve*, rather than *be served*. And like our Lord, we offer ourselves for the life of the world.
- Rejoice! Rejoice! *Emmanuel* has come to thee, O Israel.



John Everett Millais, *The Ransom*, 1860-2

### Mark 10:35-45

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.**”

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#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> This news article provides some background to their story: <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1988-08-19-8801240154-story.html>

<sup>2</sup> This article provides further information: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/amanda-lindhout-ransom-1.4865755>

<sup>3</sup> See Hymn # 56, O come, O come, Emmanuel, in *The Hymnal 1982*.

<sup>4</sup> See Psalm 49:15, and Hosea 13:14, in context.

<sup>5</sup> An internet search concerning the topic, “atonement,” will provide further insight concerning some of these ways of understanding the significance of Jesus’ redemptive work.

<sup>6</sup> Often termed the ‘penal substitution’ understanding of atonement. See Isaiah 53:4-12.

<sup>7</sup> See 1 Timothy 2:5.

<sup>8</sup> See Psalm 49:6-7, for an Old Testament expression of this truth.