

Matthew 20:20-28; Isaiah 42:1-7

In this last couple of weeks, we have seen quite a few interesting happenings that relate directly to our readings this morning. Although, if we are strictly accurate, neither Jesus nor the prophets had much to say about keeping major waterways open or security vetting for government representatives. So, what really are we talking about? Oh and before I forget we will be starting a series on Paul's first letter to Timothy next week. I'll tell you the main reading for next Sunday later!

So, in the last week we have heard virtually nothing but arguments about Peter Mandelson, the Prime Minister. Unless of course it's the on-off Strait of Hormuz blockade or the conflict between Israel and Lebanon. And the preacher thinks the readings are relevant. The reality is that the world we live in today has already seen parallels in the broad picture of scripture.

Let's look at the passage from Matthew's gospel Chapter 20: 20-28. Like all good Jewish mother's, Mrs Zebedee wants to get good jobs for her sons. So she corners Jesus and asks for a favour – for her boys to have plum seats in the kingdom.

While Jesus doesn't deny them the place, he does have to let them know the qualification for those places and it won't be pretty or easy. "Can you drink the cup that I must drink?"

By the time we get to today's reading, Jesus has just predicted his death for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time in Matthew's account. So the question that Jesus poses to the two disciples is really the question that we all must face if we want to be faithful. Are we able to partake of the same sacrifice that Jesus makes – not to redeem the whole universe but to give of ourselves for the sake of others.

The two think that they are able to follow Jesus in the same way. And indeed they will – as far as we can tell, all of the twelve (bar Judas) will suffer the same fate eventually. But like the rest of us, they can only go the way of the cross because Jesus has done so first.

So let us look at the current pattern of leaders round the world. We largely see people who have an overly developed sense of their own ability. This can easily lead to a heightened sense of superiority leading to taking decisions or positions where they simply don't, won't or can't hear anything opposed to their views. We can certainly see this with many national leaders.

But ordinary people can easily fall into this trap too. It can quickly develop from a sense of being right in one area to assuming that they are right in every area. And this can relapse into, further debilitating or destructive habits and behaviours.

For the question in hand, "can we sit on your right and left in the kingdom?", we need to look back a little into the previous chapter. The last part of Chapter 19 has Jesus tell his disciples that those who have followed him will sit on 12 thrones to judge the 12 tribes of Israel. Thus there was some justification in the question from James, John and their mother. So effectively, the question is a follow-on seeking a pair of decent seats and who wouldn't want a good view in the Kingdom? But of course those good seats come at a cost.

But Jesus gives the remedy as well as the warning. Not only in our reading but at the end of the previous chapter. "The first shall be last and the last shall be first." The reminder here in Chapter 20, we see this worked out more obviously and clearly.

“The rulers of the Gentiles, lord it over them ... Not so with you ... whoever wants to be great must be your servant ... just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.” (vv26-28)

But this is not the only place we find the characteristics of true leadership. If we look in the writings of Paul, there are many examples of what sort of leadership the Lord requires. In the letter to the church in Phillipi we see this most clearly and probably in its oldest form.

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” (Phil 2: 3-4)

Then comes the oldest form of understanding of who and what Christ was like:

“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!” (Phil 2: 5-8)

So effectively, Jesus both shows us and tells us how to behave in the Kingdom. Being seeking to serve those around us, then we recognise an important truth – service is a gift when used in the name of Jesus. And when we devote ourselves to a life of service, we discover how much more valuable life can be.

While it is wonderful to be recognised for the service we offer, it is the knowledge that we do so for Jesus that gives us the ultimate value to our lives. We may not find ourselves rewarded with an award for what we seek to do in our lives, however nice and exciting to be given and OBE or higher. What we are called to satisfied by is the knowledge that we have served Jesus in others.

Remember when the disciples returned to Jesus having been sent out on mission. They returned excited and elated, “even the demons submitted to us”. Jesus celebrated with them but reminded them that “they rejoice rather that their names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life.”

Instead of chasing approval or reward, we are called to care for those around us. Jesus even show us the reward that we gain in Matthew 25: 31-46: “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.” (v34).

How wonderful to reach the end of life, not with a file full of certificates or a drawer full of medals and awards however lovely, but with the words of the King of Kings welcoming us home because of our faithful service of him and others.

May Christ lead us into acts of service that show how desire to care for others in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.