

## Sermon for the online service 17<sup>th</sup> October 2021

Mark 10:35-45; Job 38:1-7, 34-end

All Bible quotations are NRSV

At the moment my parents' dog, Lexy, is staying with us. She is happy to be with us and loves pottering around in our garden, and digging it up too. But she is missing her favourite person in all the world, my son Ollie, who is at university so not available to throw tennis balls for her and generally entertain her. The four of us still at home will do but we don't quite cut it!

Ollie, of course, didn't ask to be Lexy's favourite person, it's just how things have panned out. However, in our reading from Mark, James and John effectively ask Jesus if they are his favourites. James and John were a pretty assertive pair; Mark tells us that Jesus nicknamed them Sons of Thunder (3:17) which suggests to me that they were fairly vocal about what they wanted, and didn't always think things through. But this particular conversation doesn't come out of the blue; in Mark 9 we are told that the disciples have been arguing about which of them was the greatest (9:33), so it was obviously a topic of debate among them, and something on which James and John decide to take the initiative. They may have come from a more affluent background than some of the other disciples – according to Mark, they and their father had “hired men” working for them in their fishing business (1:20), and John may be the disciple who knew the high priest (John 18:15) – so, to return to what I said last week about the rich man who questioned Jesus, they may have felt that their position in society made them more entitled or deserving than their companions to the seats of greatest honour. Perhaps the response that the rich man received has made them feel a bit insecure. Of course, none of that is relevant to God. To be fair to James and John, however, in Matthew's account of Jesus' meeting with the rich man, Jesus tells the disciples that they will also have thrones when he is seated in glory, so for them to be thinking about who might sit either side of Christ is not that surprising (Matt 19:28). But of course they have got things a bit wrong. Or, in Matthew's retelling, their mum has got it wrong because she is the one who asks the question (in fact she is a bit more emphatic than that)! (Matt 20:20-28).

It's easy to poke fun at the disciples, thinking that they are missing the point of Christ's teaching and should just get a grip on what is actually going on.

I think if we do that, we miss the point ourselves, and forget that we often misunderstand things and get the wrong end of the stick. It's actually rather reassuring for us that the disciples got things wrong, and we should bear in mind that they were being told such extraordinary and wonderful things that it must have been almost impossible to take everything in. How does Jesus respond to the demand made by James and John? He doesn't turn away impatiently from or tell them they should be paying better attention. He arguably teases them a little bit, just as God is sarcastic with Job in our Old Testament reading, and makes James and John think he will grant their request, but he doesn't laugh at or criticise them. And, while the disciples may not fully understand what Jesus is telling them, there is plenty that they are getting right, even James and John. After all, they are travelling with Jesus, they are witnessing his miracles, they are hearing his teaching, and some of that is sinking in.

So what are the brothers getting right? Well, they know that Jesus will one day be in glory, as the whole point of their request is that they want to be with him in that glory. With Peter, they saw Jairus's daughter raised (5:35-43). Peter has acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah in front of the other disciples (8:30). Peter, James and John have witnessed the Transfiguration (9:2-8). (There's a bit of a pattern here – Peter and the brothers do seem to be the senior disciples, again perhaps excusing to some extent their enthusiasm. Or maybe they are the ones who need the most teaching!) James and John believe Jesus is the real thing. If they didn't believe that, there would have been no point to their question; if they didn't believe that there would be no point in following him. That they want to sit beside him in heaven is a sign of their confidence in the truth of what he is teaching them.

I also think that they are perfectly aware that Jesus is telling them they will suffer. It could be that they believe the cup Jesus will drink is simply one of glory, and that the baptism he will undergo is along the lines of that carried out by John the Baptist. But to me that doesn't sound right. Jesus, after all, has, just before this conversation, told the disciples for the third time what would happen when they got to Jerusalem, most of which was frightening: "handed over...condemn him to death...hand him over...mock...spit...flog...kill" (10:23-34). The glory would come, but would be preceded by fear and pain. The cup that Jesus would drink therefore was one of suffering, and the baptism was death. When Jesus tells them that they "do not know what [they are] asking", he means that they do not yet appreciate how different God's kingdom is to the

world, and that earthly status will count for nothing. He does not mean, I think, that they do not realise they may have to suffer.

So they understood that Christ would one day be enthroned in glory; they also understood that there was a difficult path ahead for all of them, even if they did not completely appreciate how grim it could be. But the bad feeling among the disciples about who would be the greatest among them – I don't think the others are angry with James and John because they've misunderstood Jesus' teaching but rather because they are stealing a march on everyone else – invites Jesus to talk to them about true glory. Where does that lie? In service to others, with Jesus the ultimate example: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (10:45).

What sort of service does Jesus mean? It was daunting then and is daunting now. It is selfless, self-denying, unlimited, humble, sacrificial, wholehearted, total. It acknowledges that the right thing to do is always to do right by others. This is pretty hard to live up to, but have a look at Matthew and the story of the sheep and the goats and I think a lot of this can be summed up as kindness (Matthew 25:31-46). Our harvest gifts, for example, have gone to feed the hungry. The same point was made by the author Jonathan Franzen in an interview last weekend: "if you actually read the gospels...it is fundamentally a gospel of kindness."

Service may be risky, as Jesus has already told the disciples, when he says they will face "persecutions" for following him (10:30). We in this country don't face the same risks as those first followers did, but there are plenty of Christians around the world who do endure persecution and violence; have a look at the website for the charity Open Doors. James himself was killed on Herod Agrippa's orders (Acts 12:2), and is the only apostle whose martyrdom is recorded in the New Testament. We don't know from Acts why he was killed, but later church histories suggest it was because he refused to renounce Christ. John, meanwhile, was perhaps exiled to Patmos because of his faith, (Rev 1:9), although other traditions suggest he too was martyred. They paid the price for their devotion to Jesus.

Service involves standing up against injustice, hatred and division, and acting with love and empathy as we serve those in greater need than ourselves, because that is what we are told to do by Jesus. It is also sharing the good news of Christ, as our mission partners the Wilson family are returning to Ethiopia to do – the cup, after all, can symbolise suffering, or glory, or sharing.

And from this selfless service comes true glory. James and John asked to sit at Jesus' right and left hands in his glory; he tells them that is not his to grant. The two people who do get to be at the right and left hand of Jesus in his glory are the robbers crucified with him (15:27), something which John witnesses from the foot of the cross. He sees Jesus move from drinking the cup of suffering to drinking the cup of glory. Glory, then, is not what James and John initially thought it would be, but is instead humble, sacrificial, and painful, just as service is.

There is no question that the brothers learnt that lesson. In Luke, when not welcomed by a Samaritan village, James and John ask Jesus if they should "command fire to come down from heaven and consume" its people (Luke 8:51-56). (I think they were also a bit unclear about what sort of power they themselves had!). But later, in Acts, John, alongside Peter, laid hands in blessing on a group of Samaritans and the Holy Spirit came upon them (8:14-17). John's view of glory and power has been changed completely by the cross. He no longer wants to strike down those he sees as enemies but to bring them to God.

So, when John and James ask Jesus if they can sit either side of him in his glory they are missing the point and seeing things with the eyes of this world. But they are not getting things totally wrong. They know that he will be in glory, and that he is the Messiah; they know that following him may lead to suffering, but they know that they must carry on. And despite this rather ill-judged request, by continuing to follow Jesus, they come to learn, as do the rest of the disciples, and as we do, what service and thus glory really are.

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