

Mark 10:35-45

Isaiah 53:4-end; Hebrews 5:1-10

It's always nice to get some kind of a reward or recognition for something we've achieved. It might have been an award we got at school or college for doing exceptionally well in exams, or getting a medal for winning a sports event, or perhaps being a model student. It might even be getting an honour from the queen in recognition for some particular work we've done for the betterment of society. I have to admit, I even get a little bit excited just to receive a certificate for a one-day course I've attended.

And so it was with James and John. They'd been following Jesus for so long, so why shouldn't *they* be given some sort of a reward for their labours? Hence their request to Jesus that they be given a place of honour in the Kingdom which (so they thought) he was shortly going to establish in Jerusalem. They wanted a share in the glory of Jesus when he became King. It's like a World Cup final when the captain of the winning team lifts the cup and then

passes it along to individual members of the team who wave it around - each of them getting that opportunity to share in the glory of that moment. So, in the same way, what James and John were asking were that they be given positions as vice-regents who would rule alongside the King, thereby sharing in his glory.

But on this occasion, they were going to be disappointed. To begin with, the problem with their request is that it reflects a clear misunderstanding of what the nature of God's Kingdom is really about. They were still thinking of the Kingdom of God very much in *earthly* terms. In many ways, of course, this isn't surprising, given the fact that most folk at the time were expecting the same kind of Messiah *they* were; some kind of a 'political' figure who would overthrow the occupying Roman authorities by a show of military force and then re-establish the Israelite monarchy (which had come to an end hundreds of years previously). He would then rule from Jerusalem, taking his seat on the throne of David, and a golden era would dawn for the Jewish

people. And so, the two brothers wanted to get in there first to secure for themselves positions of authority in Jesus' soon-to-be-established political administration. For them, it was all about prestige and status.

And the other ten apostles weren't much better in their thinking, either. It might at first appear that they were angry with James and John because they thought the brothers had got their understanding of Jesus all wrong. But *no* – they were angry because they themselves wanted to make sure *they* got their positions of authority in the Messiah's new government in Jerusalem; they themselves wanted to get a piece of the action, a share in the glory that was to come – how dare these two think only of themselves and not the rest of us! They were all equally misguided.

The thing is, though, just before this incident occurred, Jesus had mentioned certain things to the disciples which ought to have made them realise that maybe *God's* intentions for his Messiah were

not quite as they had expected. Because the Lord had just declared to them that in Jerusalem he will be condemned to death, crucified and raised on the third day. Jesus' highest glory was to be the cross – his *crucifixion* was to be his coronation. What they hadn't yet grasped was that the moment when Jesus would come into his kingship would be at his crucifixion. Ironically, when Jesus hung on the Cross, the spaces on either side of him were to be occupied *not* by James and John, but by two bandits. It's the ultimate fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah in our Old Testament reading - one of the 'suffering servant' passages, as they're often referred to. Through Christ's suffering and death on the Cross, there is forgiveness of sins for all who put their trust in him. And as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, it was because Christ was obedient to the will of his heavenly Father, that he submitted himself to death on a Cross, and through his suffering and death, "he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him..."

Now this was all rather different from the popular triumphalist vision of the Messiah which the apostles seem to have shared. It seems that they really hadn't quite got it, or maybe they simply didn't want to accept the *real* truth – after all, the popular view of the Messiah was so much nicer, so much more palatable! They were still thinking in terms of *earthly* glory and reward.

But the truth is that *God's* Kingdom is of a completely different order to the states and kingdoms of this world. Whilst the kingdoms of *this* world are characterised by an emphasis upon status and often even oppression (as we see in many parts of the world today), *God's* Kingdom is characterised by suffering and service. And so, if we are wanting to follow faithfully in the way of Christ – as those who are first and foremost citizens of *his* Kingdom - we are called to walk in the way *he* did. As Bishop Tom Wright puts it, “The world goes about things in one way; God does it differently.”

A few Sundays ago, we were focusing on a similar incident recorded earlier in Mark's Gospel where the disciples were squabbling over which of them was the greatest. There again, it was directly preceded by Jesus' prediction of his suffering, death and resurrection. And in response to their squabbling, the Lord declares to the disciples that in *his* Kingdom, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” True greatness is seen in servanthood. And in today's Gospel reading, to servanthood is added *suffering*. Jesus came to serve, and he expressed this service ultimately in laying down his life for us so that our sins might be forgiven. Truly following Christ means following him in the way of suffering and service.

So, what about James and John, then? Well, in a sense, Jesus did indeed enter into the glory of his Kingdom. But the Kingdom was *not* about a political administration in Jerusalem, and the road to glory was *not* through a show of military might and force. For Jesus, the way to glory was to be through his self-sacrificial suffering and death. When asked by

the Lord whether they were able to go through what he himself was about to go through, the brothers agreed that they would. At the time, of course, they would have had no idea of what this really meant for them. But, after Christ's death, resurrection and ascension, they would eventually realise what it would all mean for them. They would come to realise that the way to glory is not as straightforward or as glamorous as they had first thought. In fact, as we read in the Book of Acts, the apostle James was martyred at the hands of king Herod for his faithful witness his Lord. It was through the way of suffering and martyrdom that James was to enter into Christ's glorious *eternal* Kingdom.

And so, there is a challenge in all this for *us*. Like James and John, we too are no doubt seeking to enter into Christ's glory. And there is indeed plenty of opportunity for people to sit at the right hand and left hand of Jesus in his Kingdom, and when they do, they will indeed share in his glory. But the downside is that the *way* to glory is not an easy journey. Those who sincerely want to follow Jesus must be prepared

to lay down their lives as he is prepared to do, to give up all they hold dear for the sake of the Kingdom, to give up status and prestige and to walk in humility. There is a real cost to Christian discipleship. It's not enough to simply say you're a Christian, it's not enough to say you follow Jesus, it's not enough to simply say you understand his message; churchgoing in itself is not enough. As the 20th-century German martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, once put it (and I often quote), 'When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die'.

The challenge of what it means to be a *true* disciple of Jesus is as uncomfortable today as it was for the first followers of Jesus 2000 years ago. One of the biggest problems in this country, and in many western countries in general, is the way in which so many people assume that if they live in a vaguely 'Christian' society then they must somehow automatically be Christians. That's why, for instance, when it comes to a national census, we still get significant percentages of people identifying themselves as Christians, even though they probably

have no real clue about what Christianity is really all about. Perhaps if they were presented with the challenge here as to what it means to be a *real* follower of Jesus Christ, then they might be rather more reluctant to call themselves 'Christians'.

In fact, in stark contrast to all this is the daily experience of millions of our brothers and sisters in Christ all around the world who suffer so much on account of their allegiance to Christ, and who are even prepared to lay down their lives for his sake. Apart from many other things, I think that gaining a greater *global* perspective on the Church causes us to reflect more closely upon the nature of our *own* walk of discipleship. How much are *we* prepared to give up in order to enter the glory of Christ's eternal Kingdom? Do we, like James and John, expect instant glory, or are we truly committed to following in the steps of our Lord and Saviour himself?

May it be our desire to follow in *his* way – the way of suffering and service – for he “came not to *be* served but *to* serve, and to *give his life* a ransom for many.”

Then, the only real reward that counts, in the end, is when at the last the Lord says to us, ‘Well done, thou good and faithful servant’.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we thank you that, through the merits of your Son, you call us to be citizens and ambassadors of your Kingdom. By your Holy Spirit, grant us an attitude of true humility, seeking to be the servant of others, just as Christ came not to be served but to serve. And guide us to understand what it means to be truly committed to following in the steps of Our Lord and Saviour. In his Name we pray.
Amen.