

PENTECOST 21B, 17-10-2021

Job 38.1-7; Psalm 104. 1-10, 26; Hebrews 5.1-10; Mark 10.35-45

*James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him 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.'*

Many years ago, before we came to Australia, I occasionally visited an elderly lady who had been a stalwart of the church we belonged to. She didn't get out much, so the parish tried to make sure someone went to see her. She was not an easy person and would spend the first twenty minutes complaining about the church, the vicar, the government, the weather- and then she'd calm down and ask if I would like a cup of tea.

One time she told me about a parish priest who had served there many years before. She told me he was always giving things away, and once he even gave his shoes to a beggar. She said "Of course, we had to put a stop to that."

From the stories this lady told, that man was generous, kind, and put others before himself; pretty good qualities for a priest, I'd have thought.

The image that lady held of what a vicar should be like was probably formed in the 1940s or earlier, and she thought he should be dignified and at least middle-class; giving away his shoes didn't fit her picture.

When we hear the story of Zebedee's lads asking Jesus if they can be top-dogs, it seems to be one more instance of the disciples- Jesus' chosen twelve- being as thick as bricks.

Jesus had just clearly explained to the disciples that he was going to be arrested and put to death in Jerusalem, so which part of that did they not get? How could James and John ask to be next in line to Jesus? As Jesus asked them, were they prepared to die along with him?

They really hadn't thought it through. Perhaps the brothers could see that things were coming to a head, and some kind of crisis was approaching, so they thought they'd get in before it happened and make sure they had favoured positions in the hierarchy.

What they didn't understand is what Jesus had been trying to teach them- that he had come to turn those ideas on their heads. Hierarchies, pecking orders, masters and slaves- there will be none of that in God's Kingdom.

This story about who would be top disciples is told in Matthew and Luke as well as Mark, but with some differences: Matthew says that Mrs Zebedee, James' and John's Mum, went to Jesus to ask that her boys get promotion, and in Luke's Gospel he writes simply that 'a dispute arose' about who was the greatest. This story does not show the disciples in a good light and would have been embarrassing for the early church, which means it has the ring of truth; why tell a story that makes the good guys look bad if it isn't true?

Mark goes on to tell us that Jesus patiently explained that whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant- for the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.

At the Last Supper he acted this out by washing the feet of his friends; and his crucifixion remains THE greatest demonstration of self-giving love.

If Jesus is saying that we should not seek higher positions what does that mean? Our society operates by having rulers and those who are ruled, bosses and workers, the few at the top and the majority somewhere down in the pecking order. Jesus says we are not to lord it over anyone, but to serve.

Everybody serves someone, or something. Everybody. Who do we serve? It might be:

- The Family- children, partner, parents etc
- The Company- work
- Myself- whatever I do is to provide myself with security, comfort etc
- Sport / exercise / health
- The Church (as opposed to Jesus)
- Service organisation / charity
- Voluntary work
- Any other ideas?

It doesn't hurt to ask ourselves where our priorities are: who do we serve? Who comes first?

Henri Nouwen, priest, theologian and writer, calls it, "the way of downward mobility, the descending way of Jesus. It is the way toward the poor, the suffering, the marginal, the prisoners, the refugees, the lonely, the hungry, the dying, the tortured, the homeless."

This is radical teaching, but it is exactly what Jesus talked about. When the Church- any church, now or in past times- seeks to elevate clergy to a higher status than other Christians, the Church has lost the plot and is not following Jesus. The vicar I mentioned earlier was walking the way of Jesus- in his socks, perhaps- and his behaviour shocked the congregation.

Retired English priest John Pridmore wrote that he once arrived at an airport in Africa, annoyed that nobody was there to meet him. He writes: "A scruffy and clearly impoverished porter seized my heavy and expensive suitcases and staggered off to a row of clapped-out taxis. I hurried after him; then my scruffy porter introduced himself. He was the diocesan bishop." Here was a man who took Jesus at his word.

Jesus did not condemn James and John for seeking preferment, but he did not collude with it either, saying 'not so with you'. He asked them if they truly understood what it means to be a Christian- to live the counter-cultural values he tried to teach us.

In our world, we watch in fascinated horror as politicians, industry leaders and others fight for the top spots, stab each other in the back (and sometimes the front) and grasp for power.

Jesus was- is- powerful; how could the Son of God not have power? But he did not use it to have power OVER others, and that is the difference. He had authority from God to preach and teach, feed and heal; but he used his power and authority to serve.

The Church is called to be a servant community, existing to serve one another and those around us. We can, if we live this way, be an example of collaborative decision-making, of equality and inclusion, of valuing and honouring the gifts of every person.

The church isn't perfect, but we are trying. May the Spirit of God inspire and guide us as we follow Jesus in the way of loving service.

The Lord be with you.