



Sermon preached by Revd Dr Robert Pope on 17th October 2021

Readings: Mark 10:35-45; Isaiah 53:4-12; Hebrews 5:1-10

We have heard three readings from the Scriptures this morning, each one containing a number of complex images and teaching. We can't possibly deal with every point. And so we will concentrate on the gospel reading, thinking especially about verses 43-44:

'Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be the first among you must be slave of all'.

Our gospel reading begins with that kind of statement we all dread: 'Teacher we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you'. It is like that point when someone says to you 'Will you do me a favour?' Jesus is not willing to agree to a blank cheque, an approach I suggest we would do well to emulate, and asks them what they want. Then the request becomes clear: 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory'.

Although there is a sense in some biblical passages of those on the right hand being accepted and those on the left being rejected, that is not intended here. In the ancient world, the first among the guests would sit to the right of the host and the second among the guests would sit to the left. What they seek is the position of highest honour and authority, second and third to Jesus himself when the kingdom has come.

It is almost certain that they seek power for themselves. Let us be clear about the implication of their request. Not only are James and John part of the twelve, they are part of the three; the three disciples who are closest to Jesus and whom Jesus takes with him at certain intimate moments. Now they want even more.

At first, Jesus challenges them: are they able to drink the cup of suffering that he will drink, can they be baptized with the same baptism that Jesus will have? This perhaps is a reference to the previous section in the gospel where Jesus speaks again of his death and resurrection: he has told them about his fate, but, once again, they appear to have misunderstood – a constant theme in Mark's gospel: Jesus teaches, the disciples misunderstand, he tries to explain to them.

James and John respond with startling brevity: 'We are able' in our English version translates a single Greek word. It seems to suggest that they have not really thought long and hard enough about what Jesus says. Maybe they, like others at the time and many since, had believed that Jesus was about to inaugurate the kingdom of God by force; that he was about to expel the Romans and that once he established his kingdom, they could sit in power and glory alongside him. Perhaps they sought that power, to sit in judgement and control of their fellows, to enjoy a position of authority, to bask in Jesus' glory.

We could read this passage as one which presents an inappropriate request which is rejected by Jesus. But the passage goes beyond this. Jesus explains to James and John not just that they should not have asked this favour of him – he tells them, after all, that it is not in his gift to grant it – but he tells them that they have fundamentally misunderstood his mission and his teaching.

'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'.

In the ancient world, power was associated with coercion. It was not possible to think of power in any other way. The more power someone had, the greater he – and it almost always was a he – was thought

to be. Instead of this, Rowan Williams tells us that 'power', according to the New Testament understanding, nearly always concerns freedom and this freedom is exercised positively towards others: freedom to release, to heal, to forgive. It is freedom to be children of God which, far from lording it over others, allows us to get out of the way so that the releasing, healing, forgiving love of God may come through. Jesus, then, turns the whole notion of power on its head:

'But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be the first among you must be slave of all'.

He uses here the willingness to serve alongside the stronger term 'slave' which should probably be seen in terms of serving another or doing another's bidding.

Ministry, serving, being a slave, here does not mean preaching to others but devoting time and effort to offer practical help. Serving means to be willing to do anything in order to help fellow Christians and fellow human beings. It may be costly, it may be irksome, it may be undignified. But it is something which has to be done.

What kind of kingdom is this that Jesus said was at hand?

More than anything else, the Kingdom seems to be that which turns our way of seeing things on its head. The Kingdom gives no honour to the proud and haughty and puffed up, but gives dignity to the humble. The Kingdom has no truck with wealth and power and fame, but raises up the poor the meek and the lowly. The master kneels down and washes the feet of his disciples; the Son of Man comes not to be served but to serve, not to lord it over everyone like any other common tyrant, but to offer up his own life.

The Kingdom is where the first shall be last and the last shall be first. That saying can be heard as a threat, especially by those who hold positions of authority, power and responsibility, those who enjoy their status and who feel entitled to be treated as guests of honour. Or that saying can be heard as a promise, for last in the kingdom of God is better than first in any alternative place.

The Kingdom seems to be the place where all will flourish by means of their creation in God's image, it breaks down all dividing walls which we humans are prone to building up, it sets the highest of standards for human behaviour not by giving a long list of things to do and things not to do, but by writing the law on our hearts which is as good as saying the encouraging and nurturing of the virtuous life, or the life which is pleasing to God.

In short, the Kingdom is revolutionary; what was thought valuable, isn't; what was thought reasonable, is false; what was thought true, is in fact an error. And this is most clearly revealed to us in the fact that at the heart of our faith is not an all powerful, tyrannical sovereign, lording it over all else, but the crucified messiah, the one in whom the disciples hoped, dying and dead on a cross.

But this site of apparent hopelessness, helplessness, and uselessness, is in fact the point of Jesus' greatest triumph. This is not the authorities doing away with a troublemaker, but God's ultimate act of grace towards us. God was at work, there, at the cross, silently, secretly, covertly, hidden in this event which, to all intents and purposes, looks as if God has retreated and abandoned human beings to their desolation and suffering.

Faith begins at the very point the atheists think it must end. The cross, to all appearances conveys suffering, abandonment, hopelessness, the absence of God rather than God's glory. In worldly terms, this crucified teacher, this cross, is utter failure. But, its very failure points us towards the inevitable conclusion that God's ways are not our ways and the successes of the world have to be challenged if God's Kingdom is to be glimpsed and God's Kingdom is to come.

Because, at the cross, God seeks and finds us at this place of desolation, where we are at the end of our own resources, where left to our own devices we are powerless, lifeless, loveless and hopeless, and God speaks his 'Amen' by raising Jesus from the dead. As a result, the cross confirms to us that Jesus' gospel is revolutionary. And while this is clearest in the life and teaching, the death and resurrection of Jesus, it was always God's way.

In Isaiah 53, the prophet describes (but does not identify) one who is wounded for the transgressions of all, struck down, afflicted. All of us had wandered, the reading says, but the wrongdoing falls on this one, this suffering servant who willingly suffers on behalf of the people. Yet through this one who is treated so badly, 'the will of the Lord shall prosper'. By this one, the people's rebelliousness is dealt with, forgiveness and renewal come about. This is one who is willing to suffer for the many; as a result he will belong to the great. But the people, and the prophet, must learn that this is not their exaltation to a position of power and authority, or to a tyranny that lords it over others. Because in God's chosen, they see that God's way is one of service, of suffering, of humility. Isaiah may, or may not, have been prophesying the coming of Jesus, but he confirms that this has always been God's way.

In Hebrews 5, we find that Jesus has to experience anguish and suffering through solidarity with those he represents. He is humiliated but his mercy enables him to understand and help those for whom he serves and suffers. And so he becomes the High Priest, not to lord it over others, but to reveal the way of God. And the result is he is High Priest not in the priestly line of Aaron and those who serve in the Temple, but of a higher order. Melchizedek is the first priest mentioned in Scripture. Connecting Jesus to Melchizedek signifies that his priesthood is above all earthly priests.

And so, Jesus' teaching to James and John confirms to us that God's kingdom is not like a worldly kingdom. It raises up those things and those people who seem to be despised. It is revolutionary and therefore to say 'may your Kingdom come' is to seek, to expect and to live according to this sense of God's justice, righteousness, mercy, grace and love breaking into the injustices, hatreds, violence, chaos of the world.

This story of James and John making an apparently inappropriate request of Jesus is in fact a call to acknowledge that the constant challenge we face – as a Church and as Christian disciples – is not to domesticate Jesus' message to the ways of the world and our current thinking. Instead, it is the call to see things differently, to have our worldview shaped by Jesus' revolutionary teaching and to live and act accordingly.

See here not the rebuke to two individuals who had too great a conceit of themselves and sought to advance their own ambitions. Instead, see Jesus' affirmation of God's topsy-turvy world which turns all things on their head and exalts the very things that the world despises. For here is our hope, as individuals and as communities and as the world. There really is no other way.