

Sermon by Rev David Thiem

Pentecost 21- Wesley 9 & 10.30am – 18th October 2015

Reading: Mark 10:35-45 'The request of James and John'

Theme: "Positions of power are challenged by Jesus"

Text: "...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be a slave to all." Mark 10:43/44

Introduction

It appears that as humans we often seek positions of power, authority and control not only over our own lives but often over the lives of others. Sometimes this is in a benevolent manner but for others it leads to many political and domestic disasters and in a wider sense may lead to oppression, persecution and war.

The old saying, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely", is still seen to this very day and is causing havoc in various ways throughout the world.

In our Gospel reading for this Sunday, the setting is that Jesus is heading to Jerusalem, literally 'on their way with Jesus leading the way', with his disciples and others following along. This concept of 'on the way' also comes later after the resurrection where followers and disciples of Jesus were known as 'followers of the Way' which is an interesting concept in itself. But here, in the few verses before our reading for today, in Mark 10:32-34 Jesus takes the 12 disciples aside and for the third time tells them what is going to happen to him in Jerusalem.

"..the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law.

They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."

This account is the most vivid and detailed, the first mention of the mocking and spitting and flogging. It appears very clear to us what will happen and yet the disciples seem impervious to the words of Jesus. It is as if they haven't heard them and simply have their own thoughts in their minds. Sounds a little like ourselves, on occasions, we fail to hear and understand the message of Jesus for ourselves. Rather we go with our preconceived ideas, failing to see the obvious message of Jesus before us.

It is with this background that we come to the request of James and John of Jesus.

Mark 10:35-45

Here, in the Gospel for today, we have the last and perhaps most dramatic of Mark's many cases of disciple misunderstandings. The disciples, in spite of what Jesus has just said, think that Jesus is headed for glory and triumph, and James and John want positions of greatest prominence, at his right and left hand. Sitting close by with Jesus in all his glory is the place where they want to be – even ahead of the rest of the disciples. A 'pecking order' is being established and they want to be at the top of the list when the time comes. Sound a little bit familiar – we too often want to be in the place of glory, right up there when there is something special going on.

However these disciples, at this stage, had not understood either the egalitarian character of the new community Jesus was talking about nor the suffering that awaited Jesus, even though he had just spoken freely about it.

Jesus challenges the two disciples on both counts with words that we may not fully understand as the language is a little different.

Initially Jesus says: 'You don't know what you are asking.'

Jesus then uses two images – 'drinking from the cup he drinks from' and 'being baptized with the baptism he is baptized with.'

Neither of these things, on the surface, seem difficult. Hence the disciples' immediate reply to Jesus is 'We can do these things.'

However if we explore these words of Jesus a little deeper we find that there are connotations that are not readily understood.

Baptized in the Greek can also mean 'flooded with calamities' and the image is of an immersion that is partway towards drowning. In other words your life will be turned upside down and you may well have difficulty coping with the new reality. Can you survive this, says Jesus? Also the cup, as Jesus will soon explain to them, is the cup of his blood. Thus the images are both symbols of sacraments and symbols of threats, persecution and death. These symbols were appropriate and understood by the church in Mark's time, where joining the Christian community or participating in Christian worship did risk torture and death.

Suddenly these words take on new meaning in the light of what Jesus has just said and what did and does happen to followers of Jesus.

James and John say that they are able to face what awaits them and we do know that James was in fact one of the first Christian martyrs. Do they know what they are promising? Probably not. It is a common human experience to discover we have signed on for more than we realized or intended. Sometimes that discovery comes with panic and the need to escape, but sometimes we are grateful in retrospect for the veil that hid from us a destination we would not have had the courage for at the time, though we may well be glad now for the journey undertaken.

Would my wife have married me if she'd known we'd live apart through military service, if she'd known some of the demands various church appointments place on the family, that we'd live all over the country (four states and a territory) to mention but a few external factors. It is interesting to reflect!

In a faith perspective, challenges happen that were never anticipated when we made a decision for Christ, but somehow, by the grace of God, we come through.

The passage finishes with the other disciples finding out about James and John's request and they become indignant or angry with the pair.

Jesus recognized this and called all the disciples together and explains the nature of the new community he is creating. For in their anger towards James and John, the other disciples had missed the point also about what Jesus was teaching.

It is a reversal of the world they lived in. Great ones will not be tyrants and rulers will not lord it over others.

Rather, "...whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant and whoever wishes to be first among you will be a slave to all."

A totally different community to what you currently live in – this is the Kingdom of God.

Transformation, says Jesus, happens through servant hood. This is the crux of Jesus' teaching and is beautifully expressed by Francis of Assisi:

“O Divine Master, grant that I may not seek so much to be
consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love,
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

May we take these words and this passage to heart as we seek to live life to the full as Christians in a world that does not always understand the ways of Christ and those who live life with this belief.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my God. Amen.