

Mark 10: 35-45; Hebrews 5:1-10

It must be a wonderful thing to find yourself a place in a group of people who are fired up with enthusiasm: receiving new ideas and insights that inspire them and make them want to help to change the world according to the new perceptions. Someone who can create a group like that has charisma and influence beyond normal everyday encounters. There are of course dangers in such a group. Firstly that the leader gradually becomes so obsessed with their own righteousness that power in itself becomes the object (and such power often brooks no opposition). Secondly, that those who are closest to the leader not only accept the teachings, but begin to crave the same type of power: supposedly in the belief that they are uniquely placed to know and implement what is good for people in general.

We have a sign that some of this danger could emerge from today's readings. The Gospel passage from Mark begins with the rather surprisingly blunt words from James and John to Jesus: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

It is the request of two of Jesus' closest disciples, to which Jesus replies "What do you want me to do for you?" A question, by the way, that will be exactly repeated, in next week's readings, to the blind man, Bartimaeus, with a very different response from him. This question to James and John evokes the stunning request from them for the two most visible positions of prestige and power next to Jesus, when he receives his kingdom. James and John may be partly seeking those positions on either side of him out of love for and absolute trust in Christ, out of a desire to proclaim his words and even to protect him, but their fundamental failure is that they are viewing his power and glory through the lens of human politics.

The brothers James and John are called very early as disciples; and are among his three closest and most trusted friends: specially chosen with Peter, to climb the mountain to witness The Transfiguration. Later, with Peter they are asked by Jesus to accompany him away from the others to pray at Gethsemane. These two must know Jesus very well, yet it appears that at this point they have completely misunderstood Jesus' mission and God's purpose. The dialogue that follows is a means of showing us all that the value structures of the world are not those of the Kingdom of God.

"Can you drink my cup, share my baptism?" In other words are you ready to understand and share my fate. It is easy to **say** "we can," but the reality of doing so needs an acceptance that Jesus' rule will not arrive by conventional political overthrow, nor by side-stepping the suffering and the struggle that is to come.

What is happening here? You do wonder where James and John have been since the Transfiguration. They were privileged to see Christ in his promised glory, but Jesus has also tried to make them aware of the nature of his kingdom, of the need to recognize their helplessness and of their dependency upon the grace of God for entry into that kingdom. There is a need to remove all those things from their hearts and minds, which obscure that knowledge: whether it is accepting the kingdom with the openness of mind of the children, or without the corrupting influences of human wealth or power.

In the three verses before today's Gospel passage we are told that the final journey to Jerusalem has begun.

Jesus takes his disciples aside and tells them of the suffering to come. This is the cup that James and John will have to accept and yet their immediate response to Jesus' words is to move straight to the glory that is to come and to demand their places in that glory. They have failed to hear or to understand what they are being told - and who would have blamed Jesus if he had shown anger and frustration at their response to his overwhelming news? We **are** told of the indignation of the other 10 disciples. There is however no suggestion that their anger is directed towards James and John for the request itself, but rather more for the fact that, if granted, it would usurp their own perceived power and position. Jesus must have felt deep sadness at the incomprehension of his 12 disciples, but what his words show are patience, and compassion even, in the way he deals with them. This is a dialogue that Mark uses to explain the real nature of Christ's rule and it chimes well with the passage from Hebrews.

In Hebrews we have a contrast between the human high-priesthood, some members of which of course in Mark's passage are already exercising their power against Jesus, who is the legitimate God-given High Priest. Hebrews does not deny the calling of priests in Israel, but highlights the political distortion that inhibits **PTO**

their calling. Priests are called out of their human weakness, not out of their political strength, to recognize the vulnerability and suffering of others and to deal with those needs out of that shared weakness. It is in that weakness, not in any superiority that they can be called by God to represent humanity before Him. In Jesus' time it had become usual for the Office of High Priest to rest in the hands of the Family who had paid generously for that position. Bought and paid for! The legitimacy of Jesus' calling as High Priest is the same as for other priests, but unlike many of them he is able to fulfil that legitimacy: called by God, subject to the weakness of needs and feelings, at sympathy with human needs and able to intercede for them.

Returning to Mark's passage, Jesus reminds his disciples of the source of his authority: His Father. He has neither power nor desire to usurp that authority. If James and John were to receive the places they crave, it would be only by God's grace, not by human choice or action. In explaining the nature of power and authority to his disciples in God's terms, Jesus offers a powerful account of how the world should operate. Not as those who Lord it over their subjects, but as leaders whose calling is always to serve: to serve God and to serve their fellow people. This is the calling of The Servant King ... the one whose power lies in the service of others, of those whom he comes to save from their own inadequacy and blindness. This is the way Christ offers and it strikes at the heart of human power, which is why it is deemed necessary by the religious and political powers (themselves almost indistinguishable from each other) to remove him from their midst. The weakness and humility that Christ offers is a strong threat to the power of authorities.

How would we fare in this story I wonder? It is easy enough to list the attributes we ought to have; to agree that when we feel strongest we can easily use the words "we can" to anything Christ asks of us. It is also easy perhaps to **say** that we are certain of our own faith and that our paths are clear. We can condemn, or ignore the needs of, or disagreements with, those who disagree with us. It is easier to have strict rules and to adhere to them, but is it really easy to be a servant leader? Not unquestioning or subservient, but genuinely so concerned for the welfare of others above our own, of the need to put those needs at the front of the queue for God's love, that we do put ourselves in last place.

I think perhaps we have seen an example of a life led close to this model in the last couple of days, but have surprisingly had its likeness highlighted for us only through the death of a victim. I am speaking of the death / murder of the MP David Amess. Politicians often have a bad press, those who work for the good of their constituents, (and many do), who believe in a political democracy above personal power, rarely reach the main headlines. They are public **servants** in the best sense of that term. How sad that we can only celebrate such service through overwhelming sadness. (I've picked out a few words from the BBC News website site):

***"Sir David's broad grin and boyish enthusiasm were fixtures in the House of Commons chamber for nearly 40 years. He never wanted to scale the heights of government, choosing to dedicate his career to his constituency, his beloved Essex and the causes he cared about most. One of the kindest, nicest, most gentle people in politics. The 69-year-old was one of those rare MPs who earned cross-party respect for the conviction he brought to his opinions and campaigns.***

***He always took his work seriously, but himself rarely (knight on horseback!). His constituents speak warmly of a man who dedicated his life to serving them, whatever their own beliefs, or backgrounds."***

Abigail Mkhize and her sister Ntombi spoke of their sorrow as they explained why Sir David was so special to them. ***"He was like a father to everyone, we just can't believe it, can't believe it."***

Sir Keir Starmer said that ***"Informed by his faith Sir David had a profound sense of duty and compassion. He was a strong member of the Christian community and its outreach to all in need. You might not agree with everything he stood for, but his unfailing gifts were courtesy, compassion, kindness."***

He had no say in what happened, but he will have a great and continuing influence on the perception of what it means to give true love and unselfish service to all people. God bless him.

That is all we can do if we are to accept the cup Christ offers to us and to follow his way even to Jerusalem.

**Amen**