

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 26th September 2021 – Andy Banks speaking on
Mark 10:32-45 - Jesus' Cup And Baptism And That Of His Disciples

We're returning to our series in Mark's Gospel, asking ourselves the question Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" And, "What difference does who he is make to your life?" Today we're looking at Mark 10:32-45.

[Read Mark 10:32-45]

32They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. 33'We are going up to Jerusalem,' he said, 'and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, 34who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.' ...

35Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. 'Teacher,' they said, 'we want you to do for us whatever we ask.'

36'What do you want me to do for you?' he asked.

37They replied, 'Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.'

38'You don't know what you are asking,' Jesus said. 'Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?'

39'We can,' they answered.

Jesus said to them, 'You will drink the cup I drink and be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with, 40but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.'

41When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. 42Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 43Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 45For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

[Pray]

June 5th, 1989, Tiananmen Square, Beijing. Tanks and the Chinese army rolled in to brutally crush a pro-democracy protest that had been going on for a couple of months. And one photographer, Jeff Widener, was to accidentally capture a moment that has been voted one of the top ten iconic photos of all time, as an unknown man, calmly wandered in front of a line of tanks, carrying what looked like a shopping bag, and stood in their way. The tanks stopped and tried to move round him, and he calmly moved back into their way – an act of astonishing defiance and bravery! It could so easily have been his end. Indeed, it may have been so later, as we don't know what happened to him after he was pulled away by onlookers.

But what makes that photo so astonishing is the brazen courage of one man to put his life at risk for the cause. At the start of our passage today, Jesus did something similar: he led the way up to Jerusalem, knowing full well that he was walking to his own death. "'We are going up to Jerusalem,' he said, 'and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, 34who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him.'"

The disciples and those who followed Jesus clearly knew of the threat to his life in Jerusalem, too. Hence they were "astonished" in the case of the disciples, and "afraid" in the case of the following crowd. Of course, Jesus

had twice before told his disciples of his imminent death in Jerusalem (Mark 8:31 and 9:31), but the threat to him would also have been more widely known than that. As far back as Mark 3:6 we learned of a plot between the Pharisees and the Herodians to kill Jesus. And, from several places in John's Gospel, we find that it was an open secret that the Jewish leaders were looking for a way to kill Jesus, especially after he raised Lazarus from the dead.

I'm sure that most of us, if we knew such a fate awaited us, would stay well away from Jerusalem. But Jesus walked resolutely towards his death because he knew that it was God's will. And because he also knew that death was not his end – resurrection would follow. Mark sought to ensure that his readers know that Jesus' death was far from a tragedy. Nor even merely the malicious designs of wicked men – though it was. Rather, behind the human element lay the *divine* necessity of this event. For by this act, he gave his life “as a *ransom* for many.”

A ransom is paid to buy back another's freedom. It was particularly associated with rescuing someone from slavery, by paying their debt for them. Spiritually, we are *all* in *God's* debt for failing to live as he requires of us – the Bible calls this sin. Jesus' own life is the standard against which we are measured, and let's face it, none of us has ever come near to matching his devotion to his Father, or his love for his fellow humans! The punishment for our sin (both our failure to do good and our active doing of bad) is enslavement to sin and, ultimately, death and eternal separation from God's love. And we cannot pay back our debt by doing good, for that is the standard that is expected of us anyway. It's like saying to your boss, “I'm sorry I was two hours late for work today, but I'll make it up to you by working 9-5 for the rest of the week!” That's just the minimum you should be doing. And so we find ourselves in God's debt and enslaved to sin. But Jesus willingly offered up his life for our ransom, so our debt could be paid, and our slavery ended. That was why he led the way to Jerusalem.

That doesn't mean it was *easy* for Jesus to offer his life for us. The mocking and spitting would be shameful enough, then a Roman flogging was enough to kill some people, as the skin and flesh would literally be ripped away from the body. And on top of all that there was the excruciating agony of hours upon hours nailed to a cross – the cruelty of which the Romans had honed to perfection.

No wonder Jesus described it as his “cup”! The “cup” was often used in the Bible as a picture of suffering or torment, and particularly of living under God's judgement. Hence “the cup of God's wrath” in Isaiah 51:17 and Jeremiah 25:15. Of course, Jesus himself would use this imagery even more vividly in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he desperately prayed to his Father, “Take this *cup* from me” ... before finding the strength to say, “Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36).

And it is clear that he used the word “baptism” to refer to exactly the same suffering, the “synonymous parallelism” of the two pictures emphasising the gravity of his situation. Baptism is a less common picture in the Bible for suffering, though it might have echoes of the overwhelming and terrifying flood found, for example, in Psalm 42:7. Jesus also used baptism as a picture of imminent suffering in Luke 12:50. And if, as many believe, Mark's Gospel was originally written for Roman Christians, then his readers may have been familiar with Paul's words in Romans 6:3: “don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were *baptised into his death?*” But whatever the origins, baptism here, like the cup, refers to Jesus' imminent crucifixion, which he had just described.

Of course, yet again, this teaching arose because the disciples completely missed Jesus' lesson. It seems that every time Jesus tried to open their eyes to the necessity of his death and the pattern of self-sacrificing service it would set them, they ended up focussing on something completely inappropriate instead – in this case their

own status and prestige. So James and John came to him with an outrageous request. They didn't come straight out with it, perhaps because deep down they knew this was not the right thing to ask Jesus. Instead, they sought first to gain his assurance that he would grant their request, whatever it might be. "Teacher, ... we want you to do for us *whatever* we ask." How often do we go to Jesus with a similar attitude? Wisely Jesus didn't commit himself before they had spelt out the nature of their request: "What do you want me to do for you?" "Well, Jesus, it's like this: we want the best and most important seats in your Kingdom." And the other ten were no better when they found out. They weren't angry with the brothers because it was an inappropriate thing to ask – they were just annoyed that they thought to get in first!

But regardless, Jesus wouldn't overstep the boundaries of the authority his Father had given him: "to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared." What he did seek to help them understand, however, is the *cost* of such ambition. "You don't know what you are asking ... Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?" Are you able to suffer like I am going to suffer? Boldly they think they can. They seem to think it won't be a problem.

Jesus knew only too well that they *would* suffer for following him. "You *will* drink the cup I drink and be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with." For James, that meant martyrdom (Acts 12:2). For John, it meant imprisonment on the island of Patmos (Revelation 1:9). For most of the other disciples, Christian tradition tells us it also meant martyrdom. Suffering through persecution is the *standard* experience of Christian faith. It is our Western experience of freedom and ease which is the unusual experience! Mark's readers knew that persecution and potential martyrdom were implied in their baptism into Christ's death and in their sharing of the cup of his suffering in communion together. And around the world today most of the church knows the same. For instance, in the Iranian Church, reportedly the fastest growing Church in the world, they sing songs of wanting to be martyrs for Christ so that the seed of the gospel might be sown more powerfully. Such sentiments are echoed throughout the persecuted church.

We might be tempted to wonder, if the stakes are so high, why anyone would choose this path of following Jesus – or at least of making that faith public. Why not quietly get on with life, not bothering anyone and just privately believing in Jesus? The answer is twofold. Firstly, Jesus' calls *all* his disciples to "*lose their life* for him and for the Gospel" (Mark 8:35) – that is his expectation of what discipleship means. And secondly, and more importantly, as Paul puts it, "Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all" (2 Cor 5:14). If we truly grasp what Jesus sacrificed to ransom us, and if we truly grasp that trusting in his death and resurrection is the *only* means by which we can be ransomed from our slavery to sin, then we will feel the inner compulsion of the Holy Spirit within us driving us to make his name known to many, regardless of the cost. For, nothing can ever matter as much as this Gospel! It is a matter more important even than life and death!

James and John certainly overstepped the mark in their request. But one thing they got right was that they wanted to excel in God's Kingdom. Once they had experienced Jesus' resurrection and especially after they were filled with the Holy Spirit, they learned that excelling in God's Kingdom means service and suffering. The change that those experiences wrought in their lives made them willing to pay any price for Jesus' glory. So, what of us today? What price are we willing to pay that Jesus might receive the glory he is due? "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?" Are you willing so to sacrifice for Jesus' sake? And in a culture where opposition is more subtle, more blunting of our faith than directly challenging it, what does drinking his cup and accepting his baptism look like in practice for you and for me?

[Pray]