

May I speak in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible is a book like no other. Some books are history, some are poetry, and in some books we find gallows humour, you could not make it up!

This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> time Jesus has told His disciples that He is going to be killed, He doesn't hold back, He says "mocked, flogged and crucified." This would have been much harder for them to hear than for us to read, partly because we know how the story ends, and also we have never witnessed a Roman flogging and/or crucifixion, as the disciples would have done. They would have heard the screams, they would have smelt the blood.

So here is Jesus, opening up, sharing his pain, and not one of His disciples expresses any concern for Him. Silence. It may have been a stunned silence, but still, nowhere in the passage is there any hint that any of them made a response, if only to ask about Him being raised from the dead.

Now, the "mother of the Sons of Zebedee" – bear with me if you think of the Magic Roundabout every time you hear the name Zebedee – his sons were James the Great, and, drumroll please, St. John The Apostle. Their mother is traditionally thought to be Salome, Mary's sister, which makes James and John cousins to Jesus. Salome kneels before her nephew Jesus, indicating outward respect and acknowledgement of His Lordship, and in reply to Jesus' question she says "Declare that these 2 sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand, and one at your left, in Your Kingdom." In your kingdom. There is a part of Salome that recognizes that Jesus, whom I daresay she remembers as a little boy, running and playing, that Jesus is going to be a King. Only a King can have a Kingdom.

And despite the horrifying news of His impending crucifixion – our word “excruciating” has the same root as “crucifixion”, as it was THE most physically agonizing death imaginable, some men taking as much as 3 days to die of exposure and sunburn and thirst and muscular cramps which pulled on their punctured hands and feet, and also there was a spiritual element attached to dying such a death. Deut 21, 22 – 23, “Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree.”

Despite all this, Salome’s only concern is the social standing of her sons. Families, eh? She wants to ensure that when Jesus is in His Kingdom, her sons are in positions 2 & 3 near the throne. Talk about a pushy mother. Jesus explains to her that she does not understand what she is asking, and then asks James & John if they can drink from the cup He is to drink from. They chorus “We are able” like an over-confident whilst under-qualified job applicant who claims to be fluent in Cantonese during the interview whilst making a mental note to pick up a teach yourself book on the way home.

This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> week running we have had passages relating to un-answered prayer. God must be trying to tell us something important. Salome approaches Jesus in humility and reverence, kneeling, but it doesn’t make any difference. The answer is no. Salome would have known Jesus His whole life, but it doesn’t make any difference. The answer is no. I’m sure Salome, James & John though they were asking for something entirely reasonable, of course their family member would respond favourably, it stands to reason – but it doesn’t make any difference. The answer is no.

Jesus, as True God, has patience with their limited understanding and self-seeking behaviour, because they don’t know any better. Jesus, as True Man, has to be hurt by His own familys’ reaction to the knowledge that He is going to be tortured to death – what’s in it for me?

However hurt, Jesus defends James and John from the anger of the other disciples who automatically assumed that of course, Jesus has just given the best jobs to His relatives, because ‘it’s not what you

know, it's 'Who you know.' Jesus explains to them something maybe more shocking and unexpected than His forthcoming death – that in His Kingdom, v. 26 “But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,” v.27 “and whoever would be first among you must be your slave.” That just set the established order on its head, it was unheard of.

Now James and John claimed they could drink of the same cup that Jesus drank of, without understanding what they were saying. James was beheaded by Herod when he was 44, John is the only disciple to die of natural causes when he was in his nineties. They must have been very grateful that their cups did not include crucifixion, as happened to Andrew and Peter.

The disciples were prepared to follow Jesus and be part of His Kingdom, but they had pre-conceived ideas about what it would be like. They imagined status, bringing with it comfort and plenty, which is reasonable, desirable even.

Those of us born into Christian homes and raised with faith, may not be aware of any ideas about the Christian life, accepting it as normal. Those of us who came to Christ in adulthood may have spent many hours deep in thought over the ways in which our life may change once we accept Christ as a Saviour.

What we expect in our human thinking, with our un-renewed minds, is that the Christian life will be socially, physically, financially etc., beneficial. Now I am not going to suggest in any way that the Christian life is going to be harmful, but rather we expect things to go our way. Teachers of the prosperity gospel will tell us that God will always give us whatever we ask, provided we haven't sinned and not repented and we have tithed and attended services and and and.

This is not easy to say and I'm sure it isn't easy to hear, but I believe God is telling us that some of our prayers for the future of St. John's will not be answered. We have worked constantly and prayed faithfully for 3 or 4 years to build a Church Hall - the answer has been no. There are changes ahead that we may prefer do not happen,

we like St. John's the way it is. We are used to it, it is comfortable. It's home, and it is going to change. I have heard spiritual growth being described as out-growing a favourite pair of shoes, something we have all had experience of during our childhoods. We loved the shoes, they were beautiful, they were comfortable, we made many memories having carefree fun wearing them, and now they don't fit. There is a time when we could try and force our feet into them, but it's painful and uncomfortable and doesn't bring back the happy times we remember. The longer we try to wear too-small shoes, the longer we suffer. Our blisters and unhappiness are self-inflicted. What brought us joy now brings us pain.

God is telling us to let go. The future may not be as we expect it to be – it wasn't for the disciples, after all – but God has promised us that He will not fail or forsake us, in Deut 31 v 6. God has promised us in Jeremiah 1 v 12 “For I am alert and active, watching over My Word to perform it” And in Ephesians chapter 3, Paul lays out God's marvelous plan for the Gentiles, v. 16 - 19 “ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

We have to let go of our expectations and our preferences. God is never going to let go of us.

Amen.