

Like faith like rule

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

Jesus died for all so that those who live should cease to live for themselves, and should live for him who for their sake died and was raised to life. – 2.Cor.5,15

Collect:

Most merciful God, by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ, you created humanity anew. Grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross, we may triumph in the power of his victory; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

1 He came to earth, not to be served
but gave his life to be a ransom for many.
The Son of God, the Son of Man -
he shared our pain and bore our sins in his body.

*King of kings and Lord of lords,
I lift my voice in praise: such amazing love!
But I do believe this King has died for me.*

2 And so I stand, a broken soul,
to see the pain that I have brought to Jesus;
a yielding heart will be consoled,
and be made new, the joy of all believers.

3 And from now on, through all my days,
I vow to live each moment here for Jesus;
not looking back, but giving praise
for all my Lord has done for this believer.

John Pantry (b.1946)

Mk.10,35-45

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared." When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus 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. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Dear friends

What a moment it was for John and James, 2 of the disciples, when standing before Jesus they heard him say the words, '*What do you want me to do for you?*'!

Many times they had heard him say this to people, who then got what they asked of him and went away healed and helped, their faith in Jesus having triumphed. And in fact, not long after this incident Jesus and the disciples meet a blind man as they pass through Jericho, whom he asks the very same question, '*What do you want me to do for you?*' (v.51). The man says '*Rabbi, that I may see*', and as he asks so he receives. Are John and James, therefore, not right to be hopeful in their faith with which they come to Jesus, that they will receive what they ask for? After all, does not Jesus encourage faith in this way when he says to his disciples: '*I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it*' (Jn.14,13).

This is a pivotal moment in the life of faith: To ask for and receive *what Jesus does for us* (= what God through Jesus and in Jesus does for us)! But what is that, and how do we understand it? We see that in John and James's request to Jesus there appears a misunderstanding, a misconception, because it leads him to respond to the two disciples with the words '*not for me to grant*', and to go on to say to all of the disciples '*Not so with you*'.

But this is a misunderstanding we are all likely to labour under and which we do not see if the word does not teach us to. We mustn't think that the other disciples are indignant towards John and James because they see as Jesus sees. No, they are indignant only because each of them almost got beaten to it by one next to them!

Now, what John and James, who believe in Jesus, ask him to do for them, is that they may rule with him and be rewarded in the way that they wish. What we have to recognise here is that in asking for this they have actually understood something, namely that faith in Jesus does mean that they will rule with him and that faith is rewarding. You see, it won't do to conceive of a Christian (a follower of Jesus Christ) in terms other than this that the One they belong to is indeed the King, who rules and whose rule is everlasting, that they share in his rule over sin and death and his power that is above all powers and that indeed they stand to receive by way of reward all that is the King's. John and James understand this and get this right. And so must all who believe and have faith.

Where, then, does the misunderstanding come in, and what is the nature of it?

We learn it when we follow Jesus as he explains it to his disciples.

He paints before them a picture of Gentile rulers and of high officials and their authority. It is a picture, thankfully, which we can relate to immediately and as easily as they could. We don't have to imagine sandal wearing people in tunics who apply themselves to the administrative and governing ways of imperial Rome in order to get Jesus' picture. We have plenty of examples of our own and they do the job just as well. What the picture expresses is a world in which rule means dominance over others and authority means being first. What we see is a jostling for position, for power, for pre-eminence. We see the desire to be honoured, to be important and influential, to deal with matters of consequence and people of standing, who are not beneath you, to have the say and have it over and before others. But what is such rule and authority? They are precisely such as arise from a motivation and drive that is self-seeking and self-serving. The *kind* of rule and the *kind* of authority rife in this world, all the restraints that need to be in place and honours that are insisted on, show that this is the case.

And this is the crux of the matter, the point of the picture. '*Not so with you*', says Jesus. With this little word "not so" Jesus entirely repudiates the notion that faith in him can be self-serving. What rule are believers to seek? What kind of rule are they to display? The rule they are to seek, the rule they through him share in – his rule – is not about having power over others for self-serving ends, but about the power that gives the freedom to serve and do so in a non-self-serving way. And what honour shall be theirs? Not the honour from man which is one of pre-eminence and of being first, but the honour which is from God which is due those who put themselves last and are willing to carry the burdens of others. And what is their reward? *Not something they live for*, but something they know to leave in the hands of God because they *live for him*.

Dear friends, John and James want Jesus to do for them '*whatever we ask*'. It is a faith, as it turns out, that is self-seeking and self-serving. Of this Jesus says '*Not so*'. Because a faith that is self-serving is one that locks us into ourselves, it makes God live and do all things *for us* ('*whatever we ask*') and it makes us see others in the same way. But *faith* is a life *for God* and out of this a life *for others*.

This being the way *of faith*, what is the way *to faith*? Explaining to his disciples the way of faith, Jesus doesn't leave it at that. In the word, '*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*', he points to his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead as that which redeems our lives from its bondage to sin and the fear of death and the evil one and makes us free to live for God through union with him.

Let us not seek whatever we may ask for in a spirit of self-serving interest, but what Christ has done for us in order to save us from our sins so that we may live for God. Indeed, "*This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*" (1Tim.1,15)
AMEN

Lord God, yours is the power and the glory. Heaven and earth declare the praise of your name. Indeed, how majestic is your name in all the world! We long to acknowledge it with a pure heart and a simple mind made wise. Have mercy upon us.

Let us not seek for ourselves what is yours and forgive us the self-serving ways in which we turn to you, interested far more in how you are useful to us than in how we might praise your name, trust you and be useful to our neighbour. Our joy in you is small because our selves are so big. And therefore our strength to be last and to serve is weak and so often overpowered by pride and despair. Bring us to our Redeemer in acknowledgement of our sin so that by grace we may be truly changed, because we become the place of his strength. To the praise and glory of your name. Amen

- time of prayer / intercession – [we pray for those who have become ill, are fighting illness or are recovering from it, for those in the caring professions and for those in positions of leadership and authority over us that they may seek to further justice, rule wisely and guard the values by which a society can flourish, that the course they are on may lead out of the pandemic; for those who have lost loved ones and need the loving presence of friends; we give thanks for the progress brought about by the availability of vaccines; we pray for the despondent and the hopeless, for those who seek light, for the wisdom to comfort the suffering; we pray for God's blessing on the preaching and teaching of His word, for people to respond in repentance and faith, for freedom and liberty and courage to stand for what is good and true and honours His name;

'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you.

AMEN