

Reflection for 17th October 2021

By Rev Steve Painting

Isaiah 53:4-12 & Mark 10:35-45

Whenever I read Mark's account of this conversation of James and John with Jesus, it leaves me quite astounded. I cannot fail to be astonished by the audacity of the disciples. First, they have the cheek to say to Jesus, of all people, 'we want you to do for us whatever we ask'. Who do they think is Lord, we might ask ourselves? Secondly, they seem to think that they are entitled to demand the right to the highest seats of honour in Jesus's kingdom. I wonder what is going through their minds. Are they desperate for power or status or both? Maybe they genuinely think that they deserve such honour above all others, or if I'm being kind to them, perhaps they just think that if they are first with the question, Jesus might look favourably on them. The conversation certainly prompted a bit of a row with the other disciples, who it seems, also felt that they had claim to the positions of highest honour.

What those disciples failed to see then, but caught on later, was that when the kingdom comes in full at the end of the age, none of the things they were arguing about will really matter. I'm guessing that there will be no status and no hierarchical systems of power. Status is about comparisons; who comes where in the order of importance. That to me, does not seem likely to be relevant in Jesus' kingdom. Furthermore, God's justice should to my mind, not be about some having greater power or influence than others. I can't say really how it will all work out, but my guess is that each person will be given the power that enables them to worship God by being true to the person that He created them to be. It will be interesting to see what roles there are in the Jesus' kingdom but, in contrast to what we see in this

age, I'm sure that no one will be defined or valued by the role they occupy.

Enough though of speculation, for that is all we can really achieve when thinking about the future realisation of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus in this incident is of course, as always, more concerned with the expression of the kingdom in the here and now. Greatness, if there is indeed such a thing in the kingdom of heaven, is a complete reversal of greatness in the eyes of this world. The one who is prepared to serve is closer to the righteous way of God than the one who desires to rule and have others do their bidding. Jesus reminds his disciples that 'even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45) and the way of Jesus must also be the way of the disciple. 'Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?' Jesus asks James and John. 'We can,' they reply without really knowing what they are letting themselves in for. Yet here is the thing. Jesus followers must take His cup and His baptism if they are to participate in His transformative mission for humanity and the creation as a whole. To explain this, it is perhaps easier to start with the idea of baptism. Baptism is about immersion and Jesus' baptism involves him being fully immersed in the human experience. In order to represent and transform humanity, Jesus has to be fully identified with humanity and experience the consequences of the brokenness of the world. So it is for his disciples. They cannot expect to be removed from the pains of a fallen world. Now I admit that even in this this age, Christians should see healing and deliverance, for through Jesus, the kingdom that is to come does break into the present. That is necessary to give hope to a sceptical world, yet whilst disciples of Jesus do not belong to a world tainted by evil and sin, we remain for now, immersed in that world and therefore vulnerable to its failings. Indeed, it seems reasonable to expect that the

further our world moves away from the ways of God the more we will all suffer with it.

Jesus' other metaphor here (the cup) appears often in the Bible. The significance of the cup is not the cup itself but what it contains, and the fact that those contents must be deliberately consumed by whoever chooses to take the cup. In this case, the cup Jesus refers to is that of judgment. Jesus deliberately chooses to take on the human condition, including that of suffering and death in order that those who follow him might drink the cup of life. It is significant though, that Jesus asks James and John if they are prepared to drink from that same cup of judgment.

A read through Isaiah 53, and the recognition of Jesus, as Isaiah's suffering servant puts these metaphors into reality. Jesus (though himself without sin) takes on himself the iniquity of us all (verse 6). He is punished for the transgression of God's people (verse 8) and 'He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors' (verse 12). Intercession means to stand between. Jesus mediates between God and people, restoring relationship, by bringing the sinful into the body of the one who is without sin. Of course, none of Jesus' followers can claim to be without sin, yet Jesus asks James and John if they are prepared to drink the cup he drinks and to be baptised with the same baptism he is baptised with. Whilst the church is not responsible for the salvation of people in the same way that Jesus is, it seems to me that part of our ministry of intercession is in our identification with the suffering world.

This all makes me wonder what the church should really look like and whether our aspirations are consistent with our true calling. Are the ambitions we have for success, recognition and influence coming from

the same place and motives as James and John's demand on Jesus? Jesus did wonderful things and taught with great wisdom, but he did not fit the picture of a leader as seen in the world's eyes. Jesus presented humanity with a particular way of life but did not impose it on anyone. He let its wisdom speak for itself, knowing that many would still reject it. Jesus had no army to enforce his ideals and values and had no legal powers to back his principles. He had no wealth, through which to manipulate others into doing his will. He did not have powerful, educated people around him to enhance his influence but instead chose disciples drawn from the edges of society. He allowed his reputation to be diminished by the company he kept. He did not coerce others into doing things for him but instead, chose to serve their needs. Ultimately, He suffered and died in order to give life to all people. Jesus had no worldly power but in his lack of power, the power of God was able to break through. I feel that the same should be true of the church. God's power, revealed in spiritual revivals over the course of history, generally seems to arise through those without significant power or influence in the world. The church in this country is in a worldly sense, weaker than it once was, yet I believe that we need to become weaker still. There is something here that goes back to Phil's reflection of last week. When we put our efforts into clinging on to the things that we think make us strong, we are distracted from putting our trust in Jesus and thereby fail to access the power of God. Maybe it is time for us to stop pursuing strength, accept our weaknesses, identify with the suffering of the world, and simply allow Jesus to direct our ways.