



**Isaiah 53.4-6**  
**Mark 10.35-45**  
**17<sup>th</sup> October 2021**

### **Wanting to be important...**

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*Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray to our hearts and minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

Back in the early nineties we got invited, along with 8,000 other people, to a Garden Party one June afternoon at Buckingham Palace. We dressed up for it, enjoyed having a sticker that meant we could park in The Mall and loved drinking iced coffee, something we'd never tried before, in one of the tea tents,

And then it rained. Well, the heavens seemed to open accompanied by thunder and lightning. One lady was actually struck so a London Ambulance gate crashed the party to take her away; the newspapers said she was invited back the next year.

By the end of the afternoon the majority of us had crept back inside the palace to escape the never ending downpour, making the Queen's carpets very soggy!

The reason I'm reminding myself, and telling you about this, is that it really did teach us that afternoon that however grand we felt as we entered the palace, now looking damp and bedraggled, like drowned rats, the rain had been a great equaliser!

T.S.Elliot once wrote *Most of the trouble in the world is caused by people wanting to be important*. His remarks chime with today's reading from the gospel.

In Mark 10 James and John have an eye on the future and want to

pre-book their places at heaven's top table. They bounce up to Jesus, seemingly unaware of how self-promoting this sounds and ask him for a favour. This isn't anything small like taking the afternoon off tomorrow, rather they want a guarantee that one of them will sit on his right and the other on his left in heaven. They want to be first in the queue, and if that means nudging the likes of Peter and Andrew out, that's fine by them. James and John want to be the winners.

Grabbing power and gripping it tight is a universal characteristic and maybe it's even a universal malady. People love power and people seem to love, in many contexts, powerful people.

Tune in to a nature programme on the telly and its commonplace to hear the likes of David Attenborough describe the powerful hierarchies found all over the natural world, from a tightly knit troop of gorillas to that protective sense of place a calf might find in a memory of elephants.

Hierarchy and power are here to stay. Our question, in the light of today's reading is to ask 'how' we use influence, position and power in a way that honours the God revealed to us in Jesus.

And this is who the bible points us to as we begin an attempt to answer the question and come to terms with the contradictions of power.

Let's be honest and recognise that the bible often presents us with a 'powerful' God. This is God the Creator, God as King or Father.

So, is the depiction of Jesus the washer of feet or the suffering servant, a temporary abnormality? If Jesus is meant to show us the nature of God, is the crucified Jesus an exception? At this point I should really split you into small groups and ask you to discuss!

Well, Jesus seems utterly taken aback by the request of Zebedee's sons. They've missed the point, the most important point of Jesus'

life, that he came to serve.

So, in revealing to us the nature of God, Jesus shows us what it is like to use power well. To use it in a way, in such a way, that it doesn't eat us up. He teaches us, in fact he shows us, how to use power generously, judiciously, or maybe even injudiciously and sacrificially. And this is, I think, Jesus' way of saying compassion and service characterises the heart of God. This is the norm. This is the picture, image, and concept of God we need to have at the centre of our churches, a cross – a symbol of sacrifice, bread and wine, a meal remembering the outpouring of love.

The Jesus way is to think of God as a compassionate king or a forgiving father.

And in all of this he offers an invitation to James and John. Not to join him at the top table but to become, as he says in John's gospel, his 'friends', so that together they, and we, might share with Jesus a life of willing service to others. A generous life. An outward looking life. A thoughtful life. Not sitting in a privileged position but taking a bowl of water and a towel. Not making others subservient but working together for a common good.

Today's text is surely one that speaks into all the elements found in today's service.

We have shared in Arthur's blessing and in doing so have witnessed the power of love in a family. At its best family life is an expression of selfless giving and constant encouragement. No family is perfect, and we all fall short, yet time and again it's the examples of compassion and support we found in that circle that inspire us long after that parent or grandparent has passed away.

We have shared in welcoming new members of our church. And church can be, pray God, a community where we find mutual support and offer committed service.

You know one of the brothers, John, is thought to have lived such a long life that he became a centenarian. He actually followed Jesus by living the

rest of his life as a committed member of his church.

And in a few moments we will share in Communion together. The words of Isaiah will no doubt ring in our ears. We'll recall the death of Jesus as he gave his all in forgiving love upon Good Friday's cross.

The other brother in today's gospel, James, under the persecution of Herod Antipas, is believed to have been the very first of Jesus' inner core of disciples to lose his life and be executed just like his master. Jesus asked him if he too could drink the cup of suffering and he showed he could.

In so many ways, either because of our job, our background or where we live, we have power and power, in itself, is neither good nor bad, that depends on the way we use it. The life and death of Jesus can be our greatest teacher.

Recently I was intrigued by the response given by a former cabinet minister as she was interviewed on the radio and asked why she had given up on Christianity. She said she could remember the very moment. She was at a conference and a senior cleric on the platform was asked to describe the role of the Church in one word. Now, perhaps it was an unfair question, but the answer given devastated this young, enquiring mind, a lady who later sat around the table in No.10. The one word he'd use to describe the Church, the cleric said, was 'authority'.

And that was it for this lady, she's never been back since. She thought he'd say, love or community, but instead all he seemed interested in was power and authority.

After reading today's gospel might we ponder what Jesus' answer might have been? I think in view of all he said to James and John he might have used the word: 'service'.

May it be so for us all, in the name of Jesus who calls us his friends and invites us to share with him in a life of compassion and loving service. Amen.