**Isaiah 53.4-6
Mark 10.35-45
20th October 2024**

##  Wanting to be important…

*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.*
Over the summer we spent a day being tourists at The Old Royal Naval Hospital in Greenwich, next door to the Cutty Sark.

We had an excellent tour guide and after five minutes or so I mentioned to him that one of my great grandparents was a Greenwich Pensioner. They were rather like the Chelsea Pensioners but had served in the Navy rather than Army. I was chuffed that he was interested and I walked just a bit taller during the tour thinking I had made this important connection clear.

That was until he took us to a part of the building and just let it slip that he remembered being there when he was a boy, alongside his grandfather who was then the Fourth Sea Lord of The Admiralty.

Suddenly I didn’t feel quite so important anymore. My ancestor was a penniless sailor, his was an influential admiral!

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.

Wanting to be important seems to be a universal malady. Yet we sometimes fail to appreciate its seductive grip on us and can become worrying unaware of the drive it might have upon our lives

And maybe James and John have fallen into this trap in today’s gospel from Mark 10.

They 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.

After all isn’t grabbing power and gripping it tight just natural. People love power and it’s apparent that, at least some people, seem to love being led by powerful people. I can imagine that a Psychology class would have a field day with such a statement!

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.

If hierarchy and power are here to stay, one question, in the light of today’s reading is to ask ‘how’ we might use any power we might have, in a way that honours God and reflects Jesus.

Central to the way we answer that question will be our understanding of the nature of God.

Because maybe James and John shouldn’t be blamed if their image of God was exclusively one of being an almighty King or dominant Father. Because doesn’t our view of God then go on to mould the values and aspirations we hold dear. If God is powerful, such a way of thinking might run, then it’s surely godly for me to want to be powerful too.

Let’s be honest and recognise that the bible often presents us with a ‘powerful’ God. 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?

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. I also think a much neglected symbol , but one that might say so much, would be to have a bowl and towel on the Communion Table, remembering the Jesus who washed his disciples’ feet as an act of loving kindness.

In his parable teaching Jesus still used traditional images of power personified because he spoke of kings and fathers, yet he blends meekness and majesty in speaking 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, especially that key verse that *The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve* is surely one that resonates with bread and wine we’ll share together in a few moments time.

I have a hunch that James and John were not really the villains of the piece, even if they did want to queue jump over Peter and Andrew. Maybe they had become somewhat intoxicated by the idea of resurrection which Jesus had floated in his recent teachings, or maybe like over eager puppies they wanted to be as close as possible to their master?

It’s quite possible that these two disciples really listened – and listened well to Jesus’ rebuke. Because they continued to follow him, yet maybe followed differently because of this encounter.

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.

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 is 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.

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’.

I want to end today’s sermon with an illustration from the world of television.

Like some of you I was a great fan of the TV series, seven series in fact, of The West Wing. In fact I’ve discovered so many of you liked that programme we groupies of President Bartlet and his team could even get a little AFC West Wing Fan group together.

Well, as we got to the end of the seventh series one of the big dilemmas in the script was what CJ, the President’s Chief of Staff, would do with her life – she was still young, after she and her boss had left the Oval Office.

After him she was probably the most powerful person in the US and one scene showed her pouring over a 2 foot high stack of folders from corporations and universities asking her to join their board or faculty. She ploughed through a few of them, each one offering her more money and status than the last, simply because she had served the most powerful man in the land, and they wanted some of that power to rub off on their institution.

And then one day a billionaire, with a fortune to spend turns up at the West Wing and asks her to join his Humanitarian charity. He asks her, if he could back her, what she’d like to do for the Developing World. And, quick as a flash, she says, *I want to build roads.* She used all her experience of dealing with the world’s problems daily, to say if people could have safe, usable roads, then food, medicines, teachers and technologies could connect with people where they were and bring health and wholeness.

CJ – for some of us one of the stars of the show, didn’t take a place on the board, instead she used the power she had to spend the rest of the time she had, to oversee the building of roads – she had a heart for others and wanted to use her power accordingly.

Oh, I know it was just a piece of TV – but in another way it was also a wonderful modern day parable that chimes with today’s gospel.

James and John ask for the top table, and Jesus *responds I have come not to be served but to serve*. It was a response and a challenge. And, it seems, those words went deep into the hearts of these two brothers.

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.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 18th October 2024*