



Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 17 October 2021

READINGS

Job 38:1-7, (34-41); Psalm 104: 1-10, 35-36; Hebrews 10:35-45; Mark 10:35-45

The Request of James and John

Greetings Friends. Before beginning, let us pray. May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Once more we are presented with a challenging Gospel reading, one which in fact continues some of the themes explored in Revd Alison's homily three weeks ago. Then, the disciples, having been warned of Jesus' imminent death, were trying to establish among themselves who would be a worthy successor to Jesus.

Today's Gospel sees more vying for power. James and John, without the other disciples knowing, approach Jesus and try to guarantee for themselves places of privilege and power in the new dispensation. Revd Alison spoke to us of the importance of servant leadership. No verse encapsulates this better, perhaps, than Mark 10:45, the conclusion to today's Gospel – "For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Perhaps, when we reflect on this verse, we realise just how far we are from the mark of being Christ's followers. We are commanded to love, and our hearts are easily led to suspect and resent; we are commanded to give freely, and yet we hoard and covet jealously; we are called to humility and service, and yet our bread and butter seems to be attention and status.

Let us be honest in acknowledging this. At the same time, we must acknowledge that every human being requires some level of affirmation. Ideally, we receive this from our parents. It is important and foundational in that it becomes the basis of our sense of self-worth. What happens when we don't receive this affirmation? Richard Rohr says that we become essentially narcissistic, that is, we live our lives constantly seeking the attention and approval of others.

Movie stars and celebrities are sometimes textbook examples of narcissistic personalities meaning one of their attributes is the constant need for attention and affirmation. So on the one hand, while many of us do not receive the affirmation we require early on, we also live in a society where narcissistic behaviour is upheld and encouraged. This is undoubtedly also encouraged by current trends in social media and advent of the selfie generation.

In a Christian community, by God's grace, we are able to communicate God's unconditional love to each other, thereby remedying any narcissistic traits any of us might have. This is one reason why the ability and opportunity to express God's love in a Christian community is so important. It conveys God's healing. And this is why, as you can imagine, it can be counterproductive when, in the Church, we do not embody Christ's servant leadership but instead are lead astray by the trappings of status and hierarchy.

Interestingly, as Revd Alison pointed out in her reflection on similar issues, the discussion about status arises in the context of Jesus proclaiming his imminent death in Mark 9:30-37. The same is true in today's Gospel. For the third and final time Jesus proclaims his death, immediately after which James and John make their embarrassing request. So either they have warped and perverse minds or, more likely, they have still, by this stage, completely misunderstood the meaning and purpose of Jesus' ministry. Every time Jesus says "death," the disciples think "status and glory". They will not fully understand until they witness the events of the crucifixion.

Interestingly also, there are in Mark, in Jesus' pronouncements about his death, and the disciples' clear misreading of these, interspersed accounts of restoration of sight. Jesus cures the blind man at Bethsaida Mark 8:22 and heals blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46. While obviously meant to communicate the miraculous healing power of Jesus, the healing miracles always do more than this, especially in the case of blind healings. This is shown more clearly in John 9 with the healing of the man born blind.

There is an irony arising from the supposed sight of the Jewish leaders and the supposed blindness of the man born blind, someone who would have been assigned a very low status in terms of Jewish Torah. The bottom line is that in terms of the Gospel narratives, it is the diseased and destitute that are able to perceive the true meaning and purpose of God's mission while those supposedly in the know, the Jewish religious leaders and, might we even say, the disciples themselves, are the ones who have misunderstood. May we not be like them, but instead understand what it means to "serve, and to give our lives as a ransom for many."

Amen