"JAMES & JOHN"

Matthew 20:20-28

Once again this week, this is the little bit of the service – the little bit of our lives, probably – when we can take a break from the situation that is going on around us and think about something else for a few moments. We're going to continue thinking about the disciples who were with Jesus as he carried out his mission here on earth. Last week we looked at the example of the women disciples who travelled with him and whose gratitude for what he had done for them led to their generously supporting him and his team as they travelled from Galilee down to Jerusalem. They were women who were prepared to follow Jesu to the very end, accompanying him to the very place of execution, before having the amazing privilege of being the first witnesses of the resurrection. This week, we're going to think for a few moments about two of the twelve named disciples whose example is not initially quite as edifying – the brothers, James and John.

Many years ago now, when I was teaching French, I also used to do a bit of PE and run one of the school football teams. And it was the kind of school on the edge of London where quite a few of the pupils were the children of well-known sportsmen and entertainers. One year I taught the daughter of George Graham, then the manager of Arsenal, the team supported by most of the kids at the school. Anyway, at parents' evenings I would be sitting talking to parents about the serious matter of their children's GCSE preparation and the mother of Bartolomeo Dimuccio (there were a lot of Italians at the school, former POWs who had remained in the area and had market gardens) would only be interested in whether little Bart would be able to play for the Arsenal. I'd point out that he was pretty good, but not that good – and anyway, he was carrying a bit of weight (a polite understatement, as it happened, as you'd expect with a boy raised on love and pasta) – but the clear implication was that I might have a word with that nice Mr Graham when he came to talk about his daughter (which he always did). A favour was wanted and there were some pretty unrealistic expectations.

That's what James and John's Mum was clearly after. (Not that her sons should play for the first century equivalent of Arsenal, but that they should get a bit of leg up.) Now there's some pretty strong evidence if you work your way through all the various mentions of the women in the Gospels that this was a lady called Salome, the sister of Mary and Jesus' auntie – so James and John were his cousins. I'm not sure if there was any family pressure here, but she certainly wanted her little boys to get the best seats at the table when the Kingdom was finally fulfilled. One at the left and one at the right of Jesus would mean that they were the two most favoured people in the Kingdom. And what a coup that would be for the family as well! We don't know whether James and John had put her up to this or whether they were embarrassed by her intervention, but it seems nothing had been learned from all that Jesus had recently said about status and position in the Kingdom of God.

However, Jesus doesn't just respond with a weary sigh of resignation that no-one's really been listening to him. He asks them if they're prepared to *"drink the cup"* that he will have to drink. Can they really hack it? This idea of drinking the cup comes from an image that is often found in the Old Testament – and, indeed, throughout the New Testament, too – the image of a destiny of hardship and suffering. It's often also used of judgement, as well. Jesus has just explained what lies in store for him – can James and John cope with the thought of that for themselves? They reply that, yes, they can cope with that and Jesus predicts that they will.

We know from the book of *Acts* that James is executed for his faith by Herod (*Acts 12:1,2*), so he dies a martyr's death. John, according to most tradition, spends a long life working in Ephesus and is then exiled to Patmos where he wrote the book of *Revelation*. For one, the cup of hardship and suffering is swift and brutal: for the other, it is a long, hard journey of trial and eventually persecution. Yes, says Jesus, they will share the cup of suffering. But, unfortunately, it's not up to him to say who will have which position in the coming Kingdom: that's up to God to decide.

The other ten disciples get to hear about this exchange and are outraged. They get really shirty and start haranguing the two brothers. I suspect that they are more concerned that they themselves might be missing out on the places of honour than upset that James and John don't seem to have understood what Jesus has been saying recently about the pecking order – or lack of it – in the Kingdom of God. They're a bit annoyed that James and John have been trying to muscle in ahead of them.

So Jesus has to get them all together yet again and make it clear that this is not what it's all about. If you look back through the previous two chapters, you'll see that Jesus has spoken very clearly there about the greatest and the least, about attitudes to position and power. He has given them the example of a child and told them parables that should have drummed into them that the Kingdom is not a place for those who are concerned about status and position. There is no place in the Kingdom of God for those who feel they need to be seen, who want to cling to positions of prestige or power.

Now he contrasts what the attitude of his followers should be with the attitude of the *"Gentiles"*, the pagans, the people in the world around. There was a culture then – as there is now – in which everyone was constantly jockeying for position, everyone was desperate to ensure that they were well up the order. And they liked to use their position to get what they wanted – which, in the first place, was kudos and respect. That's the way of the world, says Jesus. Indeed, we know that some of those power-hungry people saw humility not as a virtue but as a vice. I don't think too much has changed, has it? You have only to look at a programme like *The Apprentice* to see that humility is not a particularly well sought-after

characteristic of those who want to make it in life. Arrogance is what we see these days – and, I suppose, it always has been. Self-promotion is the name of the game, a game that is wonderfully facilitated by the many forms of social media at our disposal. Children's ambitions are usually summed up in words like "celebrity" and "fame". The relative rewards of those in the serving and caring professions compared with those in the worlds of finance, fashion and football speaks volumes about society's attitude to all this.

And, lest we should become complacent, thinking we're OK because we're Christians, let me remind you that the Church is in no way immune to all this. You read through any book on Church history and you'll see that it wasn't very long after Jesus had left this earth that the leaders of the Church were getting themselves all dressed up in fine clothes, building palaces and adopting titles. Indeed, those who advocated what you'd think was Jesus' way – radical poverty, humility, a life of service and submission – were even condemned as heretics and executed.

But it's not just a thing of the past. There are very high profile examples. Just four or five years ago the Bishop of Limburg, our twin town in Germany, spent over €2 million on his palace and insisted on travelling round in a chauffeur-driven limousine – before the new, simple-living Pope got to hear of it and sacked him. And nearer home we see the people who like to be seen sitting on the stage a Christian events, those who need the status conferred by titles, people who see office in the church as an honour conferred on them rather than an opportunity to serve. And how do we behave in our weekday jobs and situations? Can we really say we are any better?

Jesus makes the point yet again that those who take seriously his teaching and want to be a part of the life of the Kingdom of God need to be people who have no desire for status, who are not in it for what they can get out of it, who have no interest in pecking orders and promotions. Jesus himself left the glory and majesty and power and splendour of heaven to come into this world. If ever there was someone who knew what it was like to be top dog, it was Jesus. He had at his beck and call hosts of angels. He sat at the right hand of God the Father. He was the – well, just listen to these words from Paul's *Letter To The Colossians*:

> *[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.* (*Colossians 1:15-19*)

If there's anyone who should have been lauded and celebrated on earth, surely it was Jesus. Yet what does he say here? *"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve"* (*v28*). His example is that

of someone who really wanted to serve others – and for that he has become great. It's that way round. You become respected because of your willingness to serve, to get involved, to demonstrate true humility.

And what was the supreme demonstration of that humility? Jesus came *"to give his life as a ransom for many"*. That was the ultimate service. Jesus died in order to free us from all those things which were preventing us from enjoying the full privileges and delights of the Kingdom of God. For some people – literalists, mainly – that word *"ransom"* has proved to be a problem. To whom is the ransom paid? What was the point of the ransom? Well, it's an image, like so many other words we come across in the Bible, an image that speaks of allowing someone to go free, as a slave was ransomed – freed, usually by the paying of a fee. Don't get hung up on the fee and the person to whom it was paid. The point is, Jesus' death frees us from the prospect of an eternity without God and enables us to become citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus' service to fallen humanity was that he left the glory and status of heaven and died as a common criminal in the muck and mess of a state execution in order that we might have hope.

And if you want to benefit from that, then you too have to live as Jesus lived, to show the attitudes that Jesus did. We are called to be servants, to get involved, to be humble, to hold our own life and position so lightly that we're prepared to give them up for others. I suspect that few of us will ever be called upon to give up our lives in the service of others, but plenty of Christians down the years have been. Charles Spurgeon – arguably the most famous Christian of the late nineteenth century, a preacher who could fill any arena and whose written sermons had print runs of 250,000 – he spent time tending the victims of a cholera outbreak in London and went to join striking dockers on their picket lines. There are tales of missionaries who have ministered to lepers and ended up with the disease themselves, of vicars who have refused to evacuate plague-ridden villages (*Year of Wonders* by Geraldine Brooks is a great novel telling the semi-fictionalised story of a village hit by the Plague in 17th century Derbyshire, that would be very salutary reading at the moment), of men and women who have given up riches and titles and security to serve others – Albert Schweitzer, C T Studd, Hudson Taylor, Eric Liddell, Andrew Potter. Are you so fixated even with what little status you think you might have that you are unwilling to serve others? Just remember what Jesus gave up for you – and look for ways in which you can serve those around you – particularly at this time – wherever you find yourself, reflecting that servant heart of Christ.

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Jesus is still on his way to Jerusalem and, as he shares with his closest companions the horror of what is to come in only a week's time, as he reaches this point of overwhelming pathos and pain, who should pop up but his auntie, asking for a favour. She certainly wanted her little boys to get the best seats at the table when the Kingdom was finally fulfilled. It seems nothing had been learned from all that Jesus had recently said about status and position in the Kingdom of God.

He asks them if they're prepared to *"drink the cup"* that he will have to drink. It's an image that is often found in the Old Testament – the image of a destiny of hardship and suffering. James is executed for his faith by Herod (*Acts 12:1*), so he dies a martyr's death. John, according to most tradition, spends a long life working in Ephesus and is then exiled to Patmos. For one, the cup of hardship and suffering is swift and brutal: for the other, it is a long, hard journey of trial and eventually persecution. Yes, says Jesus, they will share the cup of suffering. But, unfortunately, it's not up to him to say who will have which position in the coming Kingdom: that's up to God to decide.

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Jesus contrasts what the attitude of his followers should be with the attitude of the people in the world around. There was a culture then – as there is now – in which everyone was constantly jockeying for position, everyone was desperate to ensure that they were well up the order. And they liked to use their position to get what they wanted – which, in the first place, was kudos and respect. That's the way of the world, says Jesus. And the Church is in no way immune to all this.

Jesus makes the point yet again that those who take seriously his teaching and want to be a part of the life of the Kingdom of God need to be people who have no desire for status. Jesus himself left the glory and majesty and power and splendour of heaven to come into this world. (Look at *Colossians 1:15-19*.) He came *"to give his life as a ransom for many"*. That was the ultimate service. Just remember what Jesus gave up for you – and look for ways in which you can serve those around you, wherever you find yourself, reflecting that servant heart of Christ.

Questions for discussion

1. In what ways do people seek status in our culture? How do you respond to that? In what ways do people seek status in the church?

2. Do you ever consider *"the cup"* that you might have to drink as result of following Jesus? What do you think about that?

3. Share any examples you might have of people who have been true servants of Jesus and of their neighbours.

4. How can we best serve our neighbours? What can you do personally? What can we do as a church? How might we serve others effectively during this time of crisis?

5. Jesus gave his life *"as a ransom for many".* What do you understand by that?

6. Spend some time praying for those who are struggling in the current circumstances.