

Immanuel, 17th October 2021

Mark 10; 35-45

Asking for the right things

For some time now, the Gospel of Mark is telling us what is happening while Jesus has set his direction to Jerusalem, and as we read just before this text today, this is all about “the Son of Man being handed over to the chief priests and scribes, who will condemn him to death” (10; 33).

And while on this way, the readings are all about following the way of the Kingdom. Last Sunday leading worship in Malmesbury, the reading was about the rich young man wanting to follow Jesus without any connection to other people, so he just walked away. Today it presents us with a strange request by James and John. What’s challenging about all this is that we today are confronted by the reality of being followers of Jesus, and this was summed up in Fresh from the Word Bible notes, last Wednesday: *“When Jesus becomes the one who offers our life orientation and safety, he doesn’t promise ease of life, or wealth, or health, or safety in any conventional form. He promises belonging, and a place where those who cannot possibly earn their way into the kingdom encounter God’s impossible promise”*. And that is exactly what we find in today’s reading as well. So, let’s see what it is all about...

In the Gospel, Jesus announces three times that he is heading to suffering, death and resurrection. And each time the disciples cannot accept this, verses 32-34 are this third time, and the reading today tells us about the disciples misunderstanding the whole thing, this time it is James and John who come to Jesus with a request, that any parent will recognise as a very child type request: “Will you promise to do anything we ask you?”, and if that is not enough to trigger off the alarm bells, nothing is. Jesus very calmly asks them what they want...

They want to sit at Jesus’ right and left in the Kingdom. WOW – have they misunderstood the whole thing of following? They are really, really confused. And Jesus tells them that in simple terms: ‘You don’t know what you are asking’. Because that is not up for Jesus to decide. James and John are still thinking of the Kingdom in the human terms of power. They think of Jesus as a very worldly ruler, they seem to understand the whole content of Jesus’ teaching as that of privilege. And this seems to be the understanding in so many cases – the first that comes to mind is the theology of prosperity: you are wealthy in monetary terms as a sign of blessing from God.

When the disciples hear of this, they are angry. Ever thought why? Did they think James and John had beaten them to it perhaps? Or that they had not had the guts to ask for the same thing? Well Jesus clearly sets the picture straight – among the non-believers it is that way **BUT** among the followers of Jesus, it must be different (verse 41-43). I often wonder what this group of people who have been closest to Jesus, really understood? And wonder then, what hope is there for us?

It raises questions of how we understand baptism, which so often people call ‘christening’, a word I never ever use. Baptism doesn’t “make us Christians”, it really sets the path we follow in becoming followers, and this is what Jesus teaches about, and calls us to. Jesus was not a Christian, was he?

But worry not: ***There is hope***. In the first place, Jesus doesn't rebuke James and John, he accepts them, and points them in the right direction. In the second place, Jesus invites the disciples to be more like he is: *For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve*. In the third place, even though the disciples are slow learners, often selfish, often mistaken, they do continue to follow Jesus. The great thing about this text is that while it does not excuse the disciples, it doesn't reject them. And understanding this, we are invited to identify with the twelve, even if we are a shaky bunch.

I believe this reading is a challenge to the church of all times, when we become complacent, when we think of faith and discipleship as something comfortable and convenient. When we see the church as trying to please the powers rather than questioning them in the light of the Kingdom. To very often the gospel seems to be "risk adverse", when clearly Jesus is saying something quite different. Very often following Jesus leads into trouble. Read the passage again with this in mind. Has it changed your perception?

Jesus three times announces his death and suffering and resurrection: 8:31; 9:31; 10:33. Why do people want to get rid of him? Because, as we read today: he came to serve not to be served; and this is a challenge to the accepted lifestyle of the times. In verse 43 we read that among you (=the followers) this is not so. We are called to be like Jesus – a life of discipleship means a life of service, not of being served.

The mark of discipleship for these times is quite different to what we see around us, where success by accumulation of power, wealth, prestige... is what is valued – what makes a celebrity today? Is that what we are aiming for? The passage closes with the invitation which is the response to the power request: ***the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many***. We are called to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, this is discipleship, this is the baptism in Jesus.

This is what we share today in the broken bread and the cup. Broken to make us whole, the cup of the new covenant for the forgiveness of sins. Asking then for the right things, this is our calling. Amen