

Address: Ann

Before we start to look at the reading from Mark, it might be an idea to set the scene; it is five days before the crucifixion; four days before Jesus is betrayed and the disciples run away and one day before Jesus clears the Temple of money lenders. Jesus and the disciples are very close to Jerusalem where Jesus has warned them that he will be arrested, tried and put to death.

James and John found themselves alone with Jesus and thought they would take their chance! They told Jesus they wanted him to do what they asked of him! A sort of order rather than a request!

(An interesting point is that in Matthew's gospel he states that it was their mother Salome who went to ask on their behalf as

Matthew considered the request unworthy of the apostles. There is a story told about Cromwell when he had his portrait painted.

The artist wanted to please him and so air brushed all the warts which were widespread on Cromwell's face. When he saw it,

Cromwell was not pleased as he said he wanted to be shown warts and all. That was how Mark felt about the disciples)

The timing, too, was not the best coming just after Jesus had warned them for the third time what would happen to him in Jerusalem. Christ's frustration at the lack of understanding must have been very great!

The privilege of sitting on either side of the king showed importance and power. Perhaps James and John felt a little superior as they had after all been brought up with servants as when Jesus called them Mark wrote: As soon as Jesus saw them he called them; they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and went with Jesus. But they had failed completely to understand the nature of the balance of power in the Kingdom of God. It is worth remembering that at the crucifixion Jesus had two criminals on either side of him, an indication of what it was all about.

Jesus told James and John that they must be willing to drink the cup of suffering that he would drink and be baptized in the way he would be. Without thinking they readily agreed to this; maybe they had learnt impetuosity from Peter! Jesus said that they would indeed do these things but it was not in his gift to allot the places. James was beheaded and although John lived to be quite old, he suffered greatly but both lived lives of service.

The other disciples when they realised what was going on were furious! Jesus must have felt so sad to realise how much his little band of followers had yet to learn, knowing that there was precious time left. He told them that if they wanted to be great they must be the servants of all. The disciples were still expecting Jesus to become the same kind of king that David had been with great armies and power over enemies. But this was not what the Kingdom of God is like. It is achieved through service and that affects each one of us.

We cannot choose who we will serve; it would be easy if it was just the sweet old lady down the road or babysitting for the young mother. It is serving the cantankerous and ungrateful, the dirty and the smelly, the druggie, thief and drunk. And it must be done with an attitude of love and grace. It is a very tall order but it is what we are called to do.

A man called George Horace Lorimer wrote:

“It is good to have money and things that money can buy but it is good, too, to check up once in a while and make sure you haven’t lost the things that money can’t buy.”

This passage from Mark raises a great number of questions. We need to consider whether we accept what Jesus wants us to do. Where and how does he want us to serve? Do we make excuses of inadequacy? The disciples were not the most educated, the most intelligent, the richest, the most popular but they were called by Jesus to live lives of service and although they failed to understand much of the time and ran away, they nevertheless

always continued to believe in what Jesus wanted of them and rarely doubted him.

God's kingdom will not be anything like worldly kingdoms and we need to understand that. It is not easy and we are no better than the disciples. We'd all like to be the top one but that is not how it will work. Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem called "Mary's Son" which gives advice on the spirit in which work should be done.

If you stop to find out what your wages will be

And how they will clothe and feed you

Willie, my son, don't you go to the sea

For the sea will never need you.

If you ask for the reason of every command

And argue with people about you

Willie, my son, don't you go on the land

For the land will do better without you

If you stop to consider the work that you've done

And to boast what your labour is worth, dear

Angels may come for you, Willie my son

But you'll never be wanted on earth, dear.

The reading from Mark is yet again challenging and makes for uncomfortable reading. A life of service is so difficult and so often we fail. The disciples too failed but they never lost their faith in their Lord and trusted him. Toyohiko Kagawa wrote:

“God dwells in the lowliest of men. He sits on the dust heap among the prison convicts; he is there with the beggars. He stands with the juvenile delinquents. He is among the sick; he stands with the unemployed. Therefore let him who would meet God visit the prison cell before going to the Temple. Before he

goes to church let him visit the hospital. Before he reads the Bible let him visit the beggar.”

So the message today is about humble obedience into service which comes through suffering and persevering when the going gets tough and eventually makes us wise enough to listen with our hearts to what Jesus wants us to do.