

Sunday 17th October 2021 20th Sunday after Trinity

Mark 10. 35-45

The Request of James and John

35 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' ³⁶And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' ³⁷And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' ³⁸But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' ³⁹They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

41 When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴²So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

Other readings: Isaiah 53. 4-12; Psalm 91. 9-16; Hebrews 5. 1-10

Homily

Before school, after school, morning afternoon and lunch break times, across this country, children's voices ring out.

Calling to one another; happy shrieks, laughter, squeals.

Playgrounds full of the sounds of children enjoying their freedom echo across their communities. "The happiest days of life" they say. Or are they? Teachers and assistants in schools know, more than most, the other side of those apparently happy playground spaces.

Scratch just a little way below the surface and most of us have less than happy memories of our time at school to recount – from out and out bullying to being the last to be selected for a team.

Playgrounds are complex places. Yes, there's freedom and delight. But there are also the beginnings of struggles to establish pecking orders and power.

Looking from the outside, I wonder what people saw in Jesus and his disciples? A group of friends with the freedom to roam the country with a band of followers and plenty of parties and meals to enjoy? A slightly odd gang of people following this man who no-one could quite make out but who certainly seemed to create a lively atmosphere wherever he went? Were their chattered conversations as they went from town to town heard by those around them in the way that we hear the happy calls of children in our school playgrounds? A group of excited, energised people on a mission – all getting on incredibly well with one another? We not only have physical distance from that group of disciples, sharing life with Jesus, but also the distance that belonging to a very different culture and living 2,000 years after the events creates. From that distance it's possible to be envious

of the disciples. If only we had been with Jesus, we'd understand so much more what our faith is about.

But then we hear today's gospel story. James and John pitching their argument to Jesus for one to be on his right and one on his left when he comes into his power, the two top positions in God's Kingdom after Jesus himself. They really haven't understood what this is all about have they? Even Jesus was surrounded by playground arguments, attempts to establish pecking orders and power. It sometimes seems that it's in the very DNA of human beings to struggle for power.

But Jesus says to all of his disciples, this is the way of the world – to seek power, to lord it over others, to become tyrants in the way they lead. But, he goes on, "it is not so among you". To be a disciple of Jesus involved learning how to serve. It involved modelling themselves on Jesus who came "not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many".

Children, when they're told off often go very quiet. Playground laughter is sometimes silenced by a sharp whistle and a few moments of intense quiet before the noise levels rise again and everyone moves on from the moment of discipline. Did the disciples go quiet at this moment and ponder their own part in this argument? What about me? What arguments might I get involved with? What am I doing that's about service, about giving my life to this cause which is about setting people free to worship God?

And what of the church today, in this diocese? What do people see and hear when they look into our congregations from the outside? Do they hear sounds of people who enjoy one another's company? The happy sounds of people on a mission together? The attractive laughter and excitement of people who know what it is to have joy in their lives? And, if so, is that what they find when they join us? Or is there something underneath the surface of a struggle for power, to make our point, to make sure our way of doing things is the one that everyone signs up to?

We're in the midst of the Time to Change – Together (Resourcing Sustainable Church) process; reflecting on what it means to be church in our culture in our day. As we look not only at our church life, but at the culture in which we are called to be church – the Body of Christ – today and into the next few years, maybe today's gospel reading can encourage us to make sure the question "who is God calling us to serve and how?" isn't lost in the midst of all the other important questions about our identity and our mission to the people of the diocese.

Conversation Questions

1. What cultural pressures are you aware of that might be affecting the way you live out your discipleship?
2. Who is Jesus asking you to serve, and how?
3. Is there anything else from the passage that speaks to you not already discussed? What is it?
4. What will you do this week in your Monday-to-Saturday ministry in response to what you have heard today? #everydayfaith