

**SERMON PREACHED AT ST MATTHEW'S KENSINGTON. SUNDAY OCTOBER
17, 2021.**

CUPS AND BAPTISMS. Based on MARK 10:35-45

We have been blessed with leaders who have given us some remarkable statements in their speeches. Martin Luther King Jr in 1963. "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character." Not so blessed with this statement by George W Bush Jr. "The trouble with the French is that they don't have a word for entrepreneur." Or this memorable, but brutally honest statement from Winston Churchill in May 1940 "I would say to the House, as I said to those who have joined this government: "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat."

Jesus said much the same thing.

In our gospel reading just now, we heard about James and John and their extraordinary request made to Jesus. "Grant to us, in your glory, we may sit one on your right hand and one on your left." Extraordinary ... not just because of the sheer gall of it all ... but they had clearly filed in the ***backs*** of their minds what Jesus had been teaching them recently. In Mark chapter 9 they had been discussing ... as they walked along ... who was the greatest. And Jesus used the naivete and innocence of a child to illustrate the unimportance of greatness. "If anyone would be first," Jesus had said, "he must be last of all and servant of all." But then, "Let us sit at your right hand and your left ..." Extraordinary. And when Jesus healed the daughter of the Syrophenician woman, it was a **woman**, and a **gentile**, who was great in Jesus' eyes because she pleaded for her daughter. But still, "... "Let us sit at your right hand and your left ..." Extraordinary.

James and John thought they were in with a chance of greatness. After all, they were two of the inner cabinet of three disciples, together with Peter. It was these three who witnessed Jesus' transfiguration, not the other 9 followers. It was these three who witnessed Jesus' raising Jairus' daughter from death, not the other 9. (Luke 8:49-56). Later it would be these three whom Jesus would take with him into the deeper recesses of the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus prayed his heart out, and. Not the other 9 disciples. So James and John had at least some experience of importance within the disciples' group. They were also probably from a wealthier family than the other disciples – their father Zebedee could afford to employ hired servants (Mark 1:20). Maybe they thought that this gave them the edge over the other 10.

What a mixed bag of characters those 12 disciples were. But here's the thing ... although they had their high points and their low points ... although they were slow to take on board Jesus' teaching about greatness ... they utterly believed in Jesus and followed him. Listen to what they said, "Grant to us that, ***in your glory***, we may sit on your right hand and on your left." Isn't it amazing that they connected ***glory*** with this Galilean carpenter who had a habit of annoying the religious heavyweights of their day, and who seemed destined to be hung on a cross? There is an amazing confidence and an amazing loyalty there.

We can take such heart and encouragement from this, too. With the best will in the world our dedication to Christ can be affected by so many things around us and within us, that we are tempted to drop our bundle of faith. We get disappointed by other Christians ... we see our Christian communities behaving and speaking in ways that don't reflect the teachings of

Christ ... we have our own health or relationship issues. And for James and John ... it all seemed to be going so pear-shaped for them. Their fellow Jews didn't like them ... Jesus was promising a way of hardness and suffering But they still believed in Jesus and followed him through thick and thin.

Maybe when life's circumstances draw us away a little from Jesus, we ought to remember James and John. True, they got it wrong and needed to be straightened out. But yes, they believed in Jesus and kept with him – James to a martyr's death in Jerusalem. John to death at a very old age on an island, far, far away. We, like them, are imperfect followers. We struggle and stumble and fall and skin the knees of our faith ... but we keep believing in Jesus who proves himself true to us time and time again.

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Jesus tested the quality and the essence of their desire to be with him. “Can you drink the cup that I am drinking? ... Can you be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?” Here we are taken once again into the world of Jewish metaphor.

The cup. It's a *metaphor* for the life and experience that God gives to people. “My cup runneth over” said the Psalm writer in Psalm 23:5, when he spoke of a life and experience of happiness given to him by God. “In the hand of God there is a cup” said another Psalm writer in Psalm 75:8 when he was thinking of the fate that God had in store for the wicked and the disobedient. When Isaiah thought about the disasters that had come upon the people of Israel, he describes them of having “drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of his fury.” (Isaiah 51:17). So *the cup* refers to the experience allotted to people by God. Jesus asked James and John “Can you bear the life and the experiences that God will put in your way ... for James a life that ended in dramatic arrest and bloody martyrdom ... for John, a life of very old age, isolation and revelation.” “Can you bear all this,” Jesus asked, “even though you do not know the details of what will come your way?” Jesus knew that *his* cup carried suffering and death and resurrection.

“Can you be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised?” There are various nuances to this word translated “baptism.” It's really a transliteration, not a translation, of the Greek word βαπτίζω – baptizo. Think about our English word “port.” It has various meanings - a fortified wine, a parking lot for ships, the left-hand side of a ship or boat. Βαπτίζω in the present tense means “to dip” – such as putting your toe into a swimming pool to gauge its temperature. But other tenses of this same verb βαπτίζω mean “to get *submerged*.” A spend-thrift person is said to be *submerged* in debt. A grief-stricken person is said to be *submerged* in sorrow. Jesus was asking these two brothers, “Can you bear to go through the terrible experiences that I have to go through? Can you face being submerged in hatred, and pain, and death, as I have to be?” Jesus was telling these disciples, in effect, “Without a cross, there can't be a crown.” James was going to know the truth of this when he said, “I am able.” John who was to go through a different set of circumstances, said, “I am able.” And Jesus said to them, “Then you will do so.” “The cup that I drink you will drink. The experience I will go through, you will go through.”

Jesus never promised a bed of roses for us when we follow him. Here in our congregation we all have faced our cups, and we have all, faced our baptisms - - - maybe we are enduring them now. But just as James and John proved, Jesus is with us in them all. “I am with you always,” he promised, and he promises us, “even unto the end of the age.” As Peter wrote in his first letter, chapter 4, verse 12 and 13; “Friends, don't be surprised at the fiery ordeal that

comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange was happening to you ... but rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings that you may be glad when his glory is revealed." The way for James and John was the way of cups and baptisms, of blood, toil, tears and sweat ... it may have been for us as well ... it may be now for us as well.

One of the great spiritual writers of this century is Henri Nouwen, a Dutch catholic priest and theologian, who in the last part of his life worked with people who had intellectual difficulties at the *L'Arche* community in Ontario. He wrote this - "Spiritual greatness has nothing to do with being greater than others. It has everything to do with being as great as each of us can be. True sanctity is precisely drinking our own cup and trusting that by thus fully claiming our own, irreplaceable journey, we can become a source of hope for many."

— **Henri J.M. Nouwen, Can You Drink the Cup?**

James and John are such a source of hope for us. May we be so for others by the way we live our lives of faith.