

St Brandon's

17 October 21

Isaiah 53:4-12

Mark 10: 35-45

Servants of the King

Be careful what you wish for...!

That phrase holds deep truth, as we consider James and John, at the centre of today's gospel reading.

We've been, 'on the way' in the gospel of Mark, hearing conversations as Jesus and his disciples journey relentlessly towards Jerusalem and the cross. He is trying to prepare them –three instances in the previous two chapters- Jesus predicts his death and explains that following him means taking up the cross and suffering too.

Yet between these conversations, he takes James, John, and Peter up the mountain to witness his Transfiguration, with Moses and Elijah on his left and right, in glory, the voice from heaven saying 'This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to Him!'

And now we find James and John asking to sit on his left and right, like the new Moses and Elijah!

In Matthew's gospel it's their mother who asks Jesus- 'can you do a special favour for my boys?' We hear the back story... the lads abandoning the family business, throwing away a lucrative future in the Capernaum fish market, Zebedee's retirement out of the window, all because of *you* Jesus. So, now you're a celebrity, surely some fame and recognition would be nice?

Before we look at Jesus' response, let's pause briefly to ask how often *we* do bargains with God... at some level expecting blessing in return for sacrifice or service?

I've been coming to church ,paying my dues for the last 50 years, I've slogged away at cleaning, making coffee, doing the books...so I deserve ... what? A comfortable life? A stained glass window in my honour? A peaceful death? Let's be honest, rather than criticising James and John.

Everything we receive from God is gift and grace, neither merited nor deserved.

What we *deserve*, when we admit our failure to live as God intended, to love others

and steward creation, is summed up by Paul, *the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Like James and John, we may discover that we always get more than we bargained for, with God, but we are called to relationship, to trust, not trade, and to grace, not greed.

Jesus responds to the brothers with typical directness, rooted in love, and that striking question

Are you able to drink the cup that I will drink, or to be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?

Quick as a flash they say 'We are able.'

I wonder how many times they recalled that carefree answer in the dark days that followed?

We prefer not to talk about suffering in sermons-and as a follow up on last week's sermon about money, it's not the most popular choice. But lets think now how Jesus' words to James and John were fulfilled, and what we can learn.

Are you able to drink the cup that I will drink? At its most literal, this is the Last Supper, the moment when Jesus holds up the cup, passes it to his friends, tells them it is his blood, poured out for them, to drink and remember.

James and John drank on that fateful evening, and later in the early church continued to share bread and wine in remembrance of him, just as he told them. We too drink his cup and remember him, week by week, it is central to what following Jesus means.

But James and John were there after supper too, with Jesus in to the garden, where he prayed.

'Father, remove this cup from me; yet not what I want but what you want.' Jesus knows the full horror of this cup: the humiliation, isolation, pain, separation from his Father, bearing the sins of the whole world. He knows what it will mean to be poured out as a ransom for many.

James and John are there as Jesus prays – and fall asleep, unable to share the cup, yet.

Nor are they able to share his baptism, his death.

At that moment, only Jesus can conquer death, pass through its deep waters to eternal life. James and John may have received John the Baptist's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, but *this* baptism is God's rescue of the world from its slavery to sin, as he rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, through the Red Sea: an image in our baptism liturgy today. This baptism is to take us through death, to life.

After Jesus' arrest in the garden, James and the other disciples run away. Yet we find John, who has followed stealthily, standing at the foot of the cross with Mary, watching as Jesus dies. John hears Jesus entrust his mother to him: a final request to a trusted friend.

Perhaps John, with Mary, tastes a little of that cup at Golgotha, as they watch and wait, see and hear Christ's passion. And it may be that God calls us to taste that cup too, in watching and waiting at the end of life, in caring for one another in grief, as John and Mary did.

We may not be called to witness suffering of the magnitude which John saw. But we *are* called to care for the frail and vulnerable, to love our neighbour as ourself. We may not face persecution or death as Christians in Brancepeth today, but we are called to pray for Christians who do face this, and to speak out against injustice, racism, greed.

And today we remember the awful cost to David Amess of his determination to care face to face for his constituents- the fruit of his faith in Christ.

Later, John wrote his gospel, the distilled reflections of one who walked with Jesus and learned to love him and his people, the remembered prayer of Jesus for his disciples on the night before he died, about being not just servants but friends when they do what Jesus commands.

And just 3 days after Jesus' death, he ran to the tomb with Peter, saw the body gone, and believed... the evidence of God's power and love, fulfilled in Jesus.

John went on to be a key figure in the early church, healing and preaching, being imprisoned, released by angels, performing 'acts of boldness' and known as Jesus' friend.

Later he writes letters full of love to the young churches and finally, as an old man on the island of Patmos, receives and records the vivid and powerful vision from God which we know as Revelation, the final book of the bible.

Praise God for John's costly and obedient faith.

So what about James? He was there back in Galilee when the risen Jesus appeared and cooked them fish for breakfast- he was probably hauling in the bursting net... He saw Jesus ascend to heaven, waited for and received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

James became a key figure in the early church in Jerusalem who, following the stoning of Stephen and the conversion of Paul, experienced intense persecution. Then in Acts 12 we read

About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James the brother of John killed with the sword.

That's all we know. James was the second martyr of the Christian church, and the first of the apostles to die for his faith. He was indeed baptised into Jesus' baptism and goes through the deep waters of death to rise and live for ever with his Lord.

James and John, naïve and brash, yet loved and transformed by Jesus, who forgives their frailty, restores their trust and hope and empowers them with his Spirit to drink the cup of suffering, to be baptised into his death and share his resurrection. May their lives inspire us, for it is the same Jesus who calls us to be his friends.