

Wednesday Reflection by David Kennedy

The disciples were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, ³³ saying, "Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the gentiles; ³⁴ they will mock him and spit upon him and flog him and kill him, and after three days he will rise again." 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." ³⁶ And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" ³⁷ And they said to him, "Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." ³⁸ But 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?" ³⁹ They 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, ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to appoint, 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. ⁴² So 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. ⁴³ But it is not so among you; instead, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many." *Mark 10. 32-45*

I can't help but feel a bit sorry for James and John in this morning's Gospel. They got it so wrong. I don't think they were being deliberately pushy. As two of Jesus' earliest disciples, perhaps they thought that had a claim on Jesus – may we have the best seats in heaven? And Jesus gently rebukes them. It was not in his gift, but only in the Father's. But he did challenge them – to sit at Jesus' left and right in glory means following Jesus fully in the way of suffering and death. That was the cup of suffering that Jesus was called to drink; that was the baptism that still awaited him at the Cross. In other words, the best seats in heaven are not about status; they can't be earned or demanded as if by right or precedence, but only by following Jesus all the way in utter and costly self-consecration.

And then, to make matters worse, we see all too human resentment and jealousy. The other disciples were furious with James and John, indignant, angry. And so, Jesus gives them a vital lesson. Look at the world out there – the powerful, the rulers, they lord it over their subjects and some of them are tyrants – and the world hasn't changed, as today too many of God's children live under oppression, corruption, and persecution. But, says Jesus, 'It must not be so among you – if you wish to be great in the kingdom of heaven, you must become a servant, and if you want to be first, then you have to become the slave of all'. And then the punch-line – 'Even the Son of Man' – a title from the Book of Daniel designating one who was presented to the throne of the Ancient of Days – Jesus, the eternal Word, 'Even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many'. The best commentary on those words comes from St Paul:

Christ Jesus, who shares the divine nature, emptied himself, taking the form of a servant; humbled himself and in obedience accepted death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and given the name above every name. (Philippians 2)

And the word ransom in Jesus' day denotes the price that had to be paid to liberate a slave or someone who was condemned. So, Jesus' death was the ransom for many – and I remember my New Testament Greek tutor at University telling the class that *many* has the sense of 'without number', or 'beyond all telling'. Jesus paid the price to liberate a sinful humanity in slavery to sin and death. He gave his life for us all, he the innocent for all of us the guilty, to bring us back to God. This is servanthood beyond all measure.

Any of us can get hung up by status and self-importance. But the Gospel reminds me, reminds us, that servant-hood is the characteristic of authentic Christ-likeness. For the clergy, I hope and pray that we may, by God's grace, be among you as those who serve. If there are chairs to be moved, dishes to be washed, sweeping up to do, I hope that as your leaders we may play our part. But, more than that, I hope that I and we as Church may give ourselves to each other and to this community in loving service. Sometimes that will mean inconvenience, hard work, and denying self. Sometimes it will mean – as Jesus did, challenging status and pride. And in always it will mean keeping the image of Christ the servant before us, who takes off his outer garment, ties a towel around himself, and washes his disciples' feet.