

Matthew 20:17-28 A Third Time Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

We find Jesus this morning in St Mathew's gospel once again emphasising the reality of his impending death. This is not the first time that Jesus has shared this with the disciples; however, what is different this time to his earlier announcements in Mathew 16:21 and 17:22-23, is that he has added a specific detail declaring that he would be *handed over to the Gentiles* who would *ridicule, scourge and crucify* him. The gravity of the situation that Jesus and his disciples find themselves in, and the darkness of the future in this passage come into focus.

What happens next then, can feel rather jarring and at odds with what Jesus has just shared with his disciples. At best one might have expects a thoughtful silence, a sense of awe and trepidation at what Jesus has just shared with his most trusted of companions. Once the news had sunk in, I can imagine myself saying something along the lines of;

'look Jesus, I have a car and the engine is running, we could be in Brighton by the end of the day far far away from any torture or crucifixion'.

Or, if that was indeed the only possible future, then I like to think that I would be seeking to console Jesus, asking him what I could do for him in these final weeks, days and hours'.

Certainly the Mother of the Sons of Zebadee had different ideas; Rather than focusing on the horror and torment of what Jesus has shared and the assumed anxiety and fear that he must feel about his future, she cuts to the chase, perhaps only hears the last part about resurrection and rather awkwardly says the following;

"Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom."

This strange request oddly jars with the gravity of what Jesus has just shared about his impending death. In Mark's Gospel the gospel writer has a slightly different version of this question, putting the words spoken into the sons of Zebedee themselves and not their mother. Some commentators wonder if St Matthew chose to give the words to their mother in order to lessen the disciples' brazen self-interest and blatant failure to hear what Jesus had been teaching by having their *mother* address Jesus on their behalf. Conversely, we could read this as the ultimate act of cowardice as the sons don't even dare to ask Jesus themselves but get mummy to do it.

In answer to the woman Jesus said the following;

“You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?”

Outrageously, the reply comes back...

‘We are able’

Now, I say ‘outrageously’ and a few moments ago I gave my pious self-assumption that if I had heard the words of Jesus predicting the horrific crucifixion that stands before him that my concern would have been to rescue or console him. Furthermore, I like to think that in answer to the question, ‘are you able to drink the cup that I shall drink’ that I would not have said ‘yes’.

But then, the more I think about this, the more I come to realise that many of us in the church and many of us who call ourselves followers of Christ, make promises and harbour intentions to follow Jesus along the way of the cross all of the time. Indeed in Lent, we pattern our own observance on that of Jesus who endured forty days and forty nights in the desert, as if my observance of lent and giving up of some vice such as chocolate or taking up a discipline such as daily prayer, is in any way

comparable to the experience and example of Jesus in the wilderness.

As I speak I find myself moving sharing the contempt that the other disciples looked upon these two men with. They were *indignant*, not at the brothers' failure to respond appropriately to Jesus' pending suffering but at the fact that the two brothers wished to have prime places of honour. If the two occupied those places, the other ten would have been excluded as if they, not the other two could and perhaps should be the ones to accompany Jesus into glory. How many times in life do we over promise or not think things through when we say 'yea sure, I can do that, no problem'. The enthusiasm of youth, to run before you can even walk, to leap out of the boat but not been able to swim; these two sons, confident in their ability to drink the same cup as Christ might be held up to us as the living vision of that other saying, 'be careful what you wish for'.

What has not quite landed with these men and / or their mother, is the recognition that to share in Jesus' glorious place in the Kingdom would follow his degradation on the cross. It is not a romantic cup of suffering where a short time of inconvenience will lead to an eternity of glory and triumph. As we know with hindsight, good Friday is a moment of intolerable absence, when the Father forsook the son. How could any one human ever imagine that they could endure such psychological, emotional, spiritual and physical agony. No one can, and that surely is the point of the cross.

As I had reflected on this passage over the past week, one aspect of the man Jesus has stood out for me over and over again. Jesus surrounded himself with flawed human beings, people who over promised him; people who discounted or could not fully comprehend what he said to them; people who could not help but allow their own priorities, well being and ambition to get in the way of their love and fidelity to his humility and love. We, the church are the disciples of Christ in this age,

and I suspect are not that different in character to those women and men who Christ gathered around him in his earthly ministry. Perhaps it is ok if in our zeal for our faith we from time to time over promise or allow concerns for our own ambitions to rule our hearts; perhaps it is ok for us to run before we can walk, jump out of boats without thinking about how choppy or cold the water might be. If the disciples teach us anything in the gospels it is perhaps because they are a mirror to our own humanity. And, if Jesus teaches us anything about our own humanity, it is that he loved and loves those whom he came down from heaven to dwell amongst. What we might say or might do in our discipleship will from time to time fall short. Yet, the journey of lent into the mystery of easter is a journey of discovery that in our successes and failures, humility and hubris, wisdom and ignorance, Jesus walks alongside us. How can anyone of us ever comprehend this mystery, match his fidelity to humanity or respond to his love anywhere near adequately. We can't. In the end, this is a truth to be experienced, to be caught up in as we follow as best we can the way of the cross.

Phil Smith
28/2/24