

30 March 2014

Christ Church

A Mother's Desire

Matthew 20:20-28

1. How could she?

We could have crowned her. We really could. And James and John too, for they had surely put her up to it. What on earth was she thinking of? I suppose it was understandable, though. She was their mother after all, and what mother doesn't want the best for her children? But it was still rather much. Could her sons sit one either side of Jesus in his kingdom? Well, we were all well put out, I can tell you! We told James and John so after all. There was Jesus telling us that he would soon be dying, and all they could think of was where they would be in his kingdom. It was so insensitive, if nothing else.

Although we were all getting on our high horse, the truth was, we wished we had got in the question ourselves. After all, we had all been with Jesus from the very first. We all deserved to have prime positions in his kingdom.

How ashamed I feel about how we acted then. We thought we understood who Jesus was - we knew he was the one God had promised, he was more than that, he was God's son. We had seen him bring sight to the blind, cleanse lepers, bring hearing to the deaf, even bring the dead back to life. We had seen him argue with the elders and religious people and come out on top. Yes, we knew who he was, or thought we did. But we didn't even know the half of it. Jesus tried to make us see, but we were deaf to what

he was telling us. All this talk about us going to Jerusalem where he would be arrested and put to death made no sense in the picture we had in our heads of who he was, so we tried to dismiss it. The fact was, though, that while we were interested in a crown, Jesus was speaking of a cross.

It was only afterwards, when it had all happened, that we realised more of the truth. Then we began to understand what Jesus had been trying to say to us. Then there came a whole lot of soul-searching, I can tell you. Had we really just been with Jesus because we thought he would give us an easy ride to heaven? Had we just been thinking of what we could get out of our relationship with him, rather than what we needed to put into it?

You see, our hope is still for a crown, and Jesus has promised that to us, so it is a real, living hope. But no longer do we think we have earned it. Rather, Jesus earned it for us (if that is the right word) by dying on the cross. Our focus is on the way of Jesus - even if that way is towards our own Jerusalem, where our own cross beckons to us. And his way was not one of self-glorification, far from it. His way was about being obedient to God, and seeking to serve rather than to be served. And not to seek reward but simply to do God's will.

So every day we have to look at ourselves to ask, is our focus still in the right place. Are we still seeking to do God's will, to follow Jesus, or are our thoughts on seeking reward and the crown? Are we after a crown or a cross? But what Jesus did promise us was that if we focus on the cross, then we get the crown as well. What could be better?

But we have discovered something more about focussing on the cross, on seeking to serve. It was something Jesus warned James

and John about, indeed he told all of us - not that we understood what he meant. That was that when we serve we can expect difficulty. 'You don't know what you are asking' he said to James and John. 'Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?' Of course they said yes. They had to didn't they, unless they wanted to risk losing face. But let's face it, they hadn't a clue what Jesus was speaking about, nor, truth be told, did we, then. Then Jesus told them, 'You will indeed drink from my cup'. It was as if he was saying to them, 'You are after the glory, but you need to be ready for some grief.'

That didn't occur to us then, but after Jesus was crucified it started to become clearer. The clues were there before. Peter, James and John came back from the Garden of Gethsemane that terrible evening and told us that Jesus had prayed to his Father, 'If it be possible, may this cup be taken from me.' Then of course he suffered a terrible death on the cross before the amazing happening three days later when he was raised to life. We then started to really appreciate what Jesus had told us when we had laid into James and John: 'The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

If that is what could happen to God's own son, then we who seek to follow him can only expect the same. Following Jesus does not exempt us from suffering, far from it. It can bring more upon us. It wasn't long after Jesus returned to heaven that James was taken from us; indeed he did drink from the cup Jesus drank from. Then there was Stephen and more besides. And as we sought to spread the good news of what God had done in Jesus, we discovered that alongside the many who believed there were many others who wanted to keep us quiet and would seek ways of putting us behind bars. It is human nature I guess to fear anything that challenges your old way of life, that may lose you

your livelihood even. So we have learned the hard way that to enjoy the glory we have to expect grief as well.

Serving can be difficult. Even if it doesn't mean physical suffering, it can still be difficult. It can be about having concern for people we don't particularly like, certainly not regard as friends. It can mean doing things we don't really want to do at times which can be really inconvenient for us. And when we are seeking to serve Jesus it can open us up to ridicule and unfair criticism. I suppose it is an occupational hazard. I think it may have to do with other people just not understanding what we are about.

That isn't really surprising, is it? After all, we were the ones closest to Jesus and we didn't understand him, so it is bound to be the case that if we seek to follow him people won't understand us either.

But if I give the impression that serving is all doom and gloom, then that is unfortunate. Alongside the grief is the glory. It's almost as if the two have to go together. On the one side, Jesus had to give his life. But then on the other side, he gave it as a ransom for many. The grief and the glory going hand in hand! So we know it is for us as well. We don't serve just for the suffering and grief. That would be silly. We serve because we know by doing that we are following in Jesus' footsteps. And that makes it all worthwhile.

We had more to learn about serving then as well. And it is so obvious. When we serve we have to put others first. So obvious, but we still hadn't cottoned on. When James and John's mother asked Jesus That Question, we were absolutely livid. Not because we were shocked that she had even considered asking the

question, but because we had every right to what she was asking for as James and John did. They may have been the ones to have asked the question, but we were no better than they were. We wanted the prime places ourselves, but had failed to understand that the one who had a right (if that is the correct word) to the top place had made himself nothing, and was prepared to die for many. His was the supreme example of service, with his focus completely on God and others. We were included in that number, but so were many, many more people who we did not know and never shall.

The fact is that we can only survive as a group if we serve each other, if our focus is on others. It stands to reason really. If we all focus on ourselves, we will all have our individual wants and expectations. Those are bound to conflict with the wants and expectations of others, if they also focus on themselves. Selfishness can only lead to argument, conflict and disintegration. But if we serve together we can be sure that we will stay together.

Spreading the good news of Jesus is what we are about. That means that we have to be concerned for other people. So much so that we want them to discover the amazing kind of life trusting in Jesus brings. It isn't something for keeping to ourselves. But that huge task would be overpowering if we were all on our own. But when we know that we are encouraging each other, seeking to share with each other, caring for each other, yes, loving each other, then we find a strength we could not know on our own.

So when Jesus spoke to us he called us together. Not just physically, but spiritually as well. We couldn't have survived as his followers if we had carried on arguing amongst ourselves. We have discovered just how essential it is to do that when we get

into arguments. We have to come together. There is no point in pretending, these things just have to be faced head on. Deal with the conflict, seek a way of agreeing. Praying is essential here. To seek what God's will in the situation. Otherwise the arguments just go on. Accept God's will and stick to it.

All this is based on what Jesus said when he got us together. He told us that we were not to be like others where people like to exercise their power over others. If we wanted to be great, Jesus said, we had to become as servants to each other. It didn't make sense to us at the time but in the coming days Jesus gave us his own example which gradually drove home in our slow minds. He even washed our feet at one point. Can you imagine it? The Lord of the Universe kneeling in front of each one of us and washing our feet. So when we serve each other we are following in his steps, who first served us, although by rights it should have been us serving him. It just blows your mind! But what a challenge to us. We need to be repeatedly reminded that our central ambition should be to minister to people, not to be admired by them.

All this makes following Jesus a matter of everything being upside down. It means we have had to change. Jesus was always telling us that. If we want to gain life he told us once, first we have to lose it. If we want to know what eternal life is like, he told us another time, we have to have the faith of - a child. If we want to receive, first we have to give. And then, if we want to be great we must be a servant. These aren't the ways of life we were familiar with. They meant we had to change not just a bit but totally. If they are the values Jesus holds they must also be the ones we hold as his followers. And they most certainly were his values. He wasn't focused on keeping His position and getting more. In fact, Jesus left His throne in order to serve us.

One more thing about servanthood. It means getting involved. We can't serve from a distance but must get close enough to get our hands dirty. If we're going to serve like Christ served, then we must learn to see others as He sees them. We can't just sit back and wait for things to happen, we have to be prepared to be people of action. We can't choose who to be servants to. Jesus did not do that. He was a servant for all of us. It eventually dawned on us that that was what he was doing. As his followers we need to be like him. So we do not ask, who should we be a servant to, but rather we should be servants to any in need. We should not be asking when should we be a servant but expect to serve at all times. We should not be asking where can we be a servant, but seek to be a servant wherever we are.

It's all a long way from a mother's desire for her two sons. But it was an essential journey to travel. It was the only way we could truly be Jesus' followers.