

Understanding the Way of the Cross

Text: Mark 10:32-45

Have you ever noticed that in every crowd there seem to be a couple of entrepreneurs,

the ones who have a sixth sense of how to get ahead,
how to make their moves and when?

Anita's cousin, Walter, selling disco tickets in the garage, aged 8.

They are the kids voted "Most likely to succeed,"

the ones who end up with a good job AND a car
AND good marks at school, etc.

Had James and John been alive today they would have been such people.
They were ambitious.

Earlier in life they had developed a good fishing business with their father.
That had been left behind when Jesus had called them to become a part of his entourage, his inner circle.

But the basic drive to succeed, to get ahead was still very much with them.
And we see some of it here.

Here in these verses we read tonight, Jesus is very deliberately heading off to Jerusalem.

He is headed to confrontation with the political and religious rulers of the day.

The disciples sense this...

Sense that something big is about to happen.

They are not sure what...but they want to be in on the action.

They figure that Jesus is going to make a big political move.

He is push aside the Pharisees;

He is going to get rid of the oppressive Romans.

He is going to re-establish Jewish greatness.

A new kingdom, with a new king.

So they want to be in on the action.

But they haven't heard what Jesus is actually saying.

Of the three recorded prophecies of his suffering recorded in Mark (cf 8:31; 9:31), this 3rd one is the most detailed.

For the first time Jerusalem is mentioned as his destination.

Jesus gives more information about what will happen to him there.

You can sense tension in the air...just by the astonished reaction of the Disciples.

There is a sense of anxiety among his followers.

Totally inappropriately James & John come forward with their request to share in Jesus glory.

Matthew puts the words in the mouth of mother (20:20ff).

Luke omits it altogether.

Not understanding what Jesus was on about...

They figure that if Jesus is going to be on the dais...

They wanted to be right there with him.

And so they come asking him for the top spots in the coming Kingdom.

The place of greatest honour was the seat to the right of the king.

The next best was to take the seat on the left.

It was an unservant-like request.

And it showed they had not learned the lessons of chapter 9.

Look for a moment with me at verse 33 of chapter nine:

9:33 They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" 34 But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. 35 Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

Now that's pretty much the punchline of this passage too, isn't it?

So they had not really learned much since then.

Jesus talks about showing your greatness by putting yourself last, and all James and John can think of is having their greatness displayed by sitting on kingly thrones of power next to Jesus when he is crowned Messiah.

But Jesus replies,

"You don't know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"

What is Jesus talking about?

Well, it's a lot easier for us, looking back in hindsight, than it was for the disciples, who were desperately trying to work out the meaning of all the cryptic things Jesus was saying about his impending crucifixion.

The Old Testament often uses the wine cup as a symbol of suffering, usually suffering inflicted by God as a punishment.

Isa 51:17 Awake, awake! Rise up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD the **cup** of his wrath, you who have drained to its dregs the goblet that makes men stagger.

Isa 51:22 This is what your Sovereign LORD says, your God, who defends his people: “See, I have taken out of your hand the **cup** that made you stagger; from that **cup**, the goblet of my wrath, you will never drink again.

Jer 25:15 This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: “Take from my hand this **cup filled with** the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it.

Eze 23:31-34 You have gone the way of your sister; so I will put her **cup** into your hand. This is what the Sovereign LORD says: “You will drink your sister’s **cup**, a **cup** large and deep; it will bring scorn and derision, for it holds so much. You will be filled with drunkenness and sorrow, the **cup of** ruin and desolation, the **cup of** your sister Samaria. You will drink it and drain it dry; you will dash it to pieces and tear your breasts. I have spoken, declares the Sovereign LORD.

And baptism was a well-known image of death...
pointing to the cross experience of Jesus.

In Luke chapter 12 Jesus says, "I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished!"

Baptism is something associated with grief and repentance for sin.
It is also symbolic of being plunged into death and rising again.

Jesus of course didn't have to repent of his own sin,
but he did bear the grief associated with all our sin,
and he was baptised into death and then back up again to life,
just as someone goes into the waters and comes back up again.

That's why Jesus tells James and John that they don't know what they are asking.

They do not realise that the path to glory lies through the valley of the shadow of death.

Jesus himself, let alone any who would follow him, cannot sit down in glory before he first goes through the most terrible suffering for the sake of the gospel of God.

So what they are asking for is to suffer shame, humiliation, and pain like their master.

James & John look at each other and shrug their shoulders.

Sure, they would be able to endure some tough times to get ahead.

Who wouldn't? They've done it before, they can do it again.

"*We can*," they answered.

If they really understood this, they would not have answered so glibly.

Their answer shows that not only did they not know what **THEY** were asking, they also didn't know what Jesus was asking either.

Jesus offers them a share in his suffering.

All the apostles suffered terribly for the sake of the gospel.
And the bible tells us that every Christian will suffer to some degree in this world, if he or she seeks to follow Christ against the world.

In fact, James was to be the first, among the 12, to lose his life for Christ (Acts 12:2).
Whereas, John was probably the last.

Jesus grants them the privilege of following him in suffering.
But he does not grant their original request to sit at his right and left hand in glory.
That is not for him, but for the Father, to grant.

Now who are those who will sit in these places?
The ones called, "those for whom they have been prepared?"
Who will be in those places?
We do not know, and it does not matter.
That's the whole point.
It's not our business.

Jesus tells us what is our business, and it has to do not with ruling in glory up there,
but with serving in humility down here.

Word eventually leaks out.
Someone must have overheard the conversation and passed it on.
Jealous frowns develop on the faces of the other disciples in that little group headed
to Jerusalem;
disciples worried that James and John would get to what *they* wanted and snatch it
from them.

Now the other disciples showed that they were no better than James and John.
They responded to an un-servant-like request with an equally un-servant-like
response.

Well Jesus calls them together and yet again explains to them that the kingdom of
God is not like the way worldly kingdoms operate.

Again Jesus has to explain to them how different things are in the kingdom of God.

Greatness is not about power and prestige...but about service and self-giving love.

Amazes me how this story follows on directly after the story of the rich young ruler.
Here was a guy who had everything...youth, wealth and power...
But he lacked the heart for God...held onto his possessions rather than God.
I think that Mark deliberately puts the stories side-by-side.

Jesus turns the value system of the world totally upside down.

The life of discipleship is to be marked with humility and service...
And the supreme example of this is Jesus himself.
He was about to totally give his life for them, and us.

Where is the servant role of leadership seen today?
Certainly not in corporate high flyers.
Like many people today, the disciples were modelling themselves on the wrong examples.
Instead of modelling themselves on Jesus...
They were admiring the power and authority of the Roman rulers.
Men who loved position and authority.

While there is nothing wrong with aspiring to greatness...
We must be careful how we define greatness, and why we want to achieve it.

Jesus said, 'Whoever wants to be great among you must be a servant; whoever wants to be first, must be slave of all.'

God's pattern in Scripture is that a person must first be a servant before God promotes them to ruler.
This was true of Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Timothy and even Jesus.
Unless we know how to obey orders...we have no right to give orders.

Before a person exercises authority, he/she must know what it means to be under authority.

If Jesus Christ followed that pattern in accomplishing our redemption...
Then surely there is no greater pattern to follow.

Jesus is our great example.

The lead up to Christmas is called 'Advent'
Advent means - "coming, arrival".

We remember the coming, the arrival of Jesus Christ on earth;
the Holy, majestic Son of God stooping down to become a human being

The great God whom we serve getting off his throne and laying aside his royal robes to get down on his knees, becoming one with the experiences of us
and ascending his throne called the cross.

Doing it all for us
for you!
for me!

That's Advent.

That's the Christian message.
That's the road to glory, eternal glory.
A road carved out and paved by Jesus.

Immanuel - God is with us.

If you want to be known as a spiritual leader or someone great in the church, it's not about being a boss.

It's not about getting your way or implementing your plans for what you think is best for the church, or for your home group, or for your family.

Instead, you must be willing to be everyone's slave.

More than that, Jesus gave up his very life for us, as a ransom for our sins, to redeem us, to buy us back from slavery.

And we must be willing to give up our very self,
to live our lives for others, not for our own benefit.

That's where real Greatness is found.

Like in Philippians 2 greatness begins with putting on the attitude of humility Jesus showed.

And it results in actions that serve others before self.

Jesus modeled this kind of Greatness.

Now of course the words of Jesus and the apostles about how Christian leaders should act obviously apply more directly to some than to others.

It's easy to see how they apply immediately to me, as Pastor, or Church Council leaders or others.

But it also applies to you.

It's not just the official church elders who are to serve.

We all have responsibilities to each other.

You may not be a teacher or preacher or member of the Church Council.

But you can still serve in just as great a capacity, by caring for others.

Pray for each other, especially for those who are struggling as Christians.

Be there for each other.

Be willing to listen and to help.

Be in touch with each other.

If you notice someone hasn't been at church for three weeks, contact them and find out how they're going.

Be examples of godliness.

I don't know whether this story is a legend or true, but it's one that Americans like to tell about their early leaders. It illustrates the kind of leadership God requires in His Church:

During the American Revolutionary War a company of soldiers under the command of a captain was building a fort out of a pile of heavy logs.

While wrestling with a log which was to form the capstone and was really too heavy for the men to handle, the captain kept yelling at his men "heave it up", while he himself stood by with his hands on his hips.

Suddenly a stranger in everyday clothing rode up on horseback, and seeing the soldiers sweating and struggling with the log, he stopped and asked the captain why he was not helping his men. "I AM AN OFFICER" was the reply.

With that the stranger leapt off his horse, took off his coat, and helped the men put the heavy log in place. Then, as he was about to ride away, he said to the captain "Next time you need help, just call on me. My name is George Washington and I am Commander In Chief of The United States Army!"

That is the kind of leadership Jesus exercised.
We are called to have the servant attitude.
That is not what the World will try to convince you to do.

As Christians we cannot assume, as far too many people do, that everyone else exists to serve us.

I don't know how you get that through to a spoiled 5 year old?

Do you come to church just to receive ministry and encouragement, or to give it?
Do you involve yourself with other Christians only to the extent that you feel your own needs are met?

Or do you consider how going to a home bible study group or a prayer meeting might encourage and minister to others?

Are you a getter or a giver?
There is a healthy competition that Jesus wants us to be involved in.

Whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

Is that the servant mentality you have?
Are you striving to out compete one another in humble service?

If you love Jesus for what he has done to save you, then you will have the motivation to reach for these things.

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."