

2<sup>nd</sup> April 2017

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

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Hymns:     17     “With gladness we worship”  
              415    “The Church of Christ in every age”  
              455    “All my hope on God is founded”  
              571    “As your family, Lord, see us here”  
              465    “Guide me, O thou great Jehovah”

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Readings:  Psalm 130  
              Matthew 20:17-28

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### ***“HOW WRONG COULD THEY BE?”***

What a revealing passage we have heard! Nowhere else in the Gospels do we see the fundamental clash between Jesus and his disciples so graphically illustrated as here. Nowhere else do we see how deep is the gulf between the Kingdom of our God and the kingdoms of this world.

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. He took his disciples on one side to explain to them what was going to happen in Jerusalem. It was the first time that he had tried to do this. Twice before he had tried but Jesus knew that the disciples had not understood.

So Jesus spells it out again. “I’m going to be condemned to death, handed over to the pagan, Roman authorities. I’m going to be mocked, tortured and crucified. On the third day I will be raised.” Yes, Jesus spoke of himself as the Son of Man, yes, he spoke in the third person but the disciples heard the words as applying to Jesus. Yet they had ears but did not hear. They had eyes but they did not see.

Difficult as it may be, try to put yourself in the shoes of those disciples. You are travelling with Jesus to Jerusalem. He has already told you that he is going to suffer in Jerusalem and now he tells you in graphic terms what will happen there. How would you react? You don’t want to hear Jesus talking in this way. You want to close your ears to these predictions. You begin to think about why you joined Jesus at the beginning of his ministry – this is not what you thought you were signing up for!

And then some of the thoughts of the disciples are surfaced through the mother of James and John. Was she put up to it by her sons or was it her ambition for them that caused her to speak? We cannot know.

What we do know is that she asks a question that opens up an enormous gulf between the words and intentions of Jesus and the thoughts and plans of the disciples.

“Jesus, when you become king, can my sons, James and John, sit on your right hand and your left?” In other words, can they have the top jobs in your ruling cabinet?

Jesus has been talking about suffering and death. The disciples are thinking of their position, their power and influence when the new kingdom comes. And what about the other ten disciples. They were annoyed, not because their thoughts were any different but because these two cousins of Jesus, James and John, had tried to get in first.

This incident not only gives us a window into how far the thoughts of the disciples were from those of Jesus, it also gives us a window into how people try to gain power across the world and down the ages.

Politicians, who are eager to gain power and advance their ambitions try to identify those leaders who look as if they are going places, look like they are on a winning streak and then they try to hitch their career wagon to these people. We saw it here in Britain during the EU Referendum and in the subsequent struggle for the Prime Ministership once David Cameron had stepped down. A number of Conservative party politicians sought to discern which way the EU Referendum wind was blowing so that they could ride along in the slipstream. We know of some who dithered as to which way to go and which way would further their ambitions most effectively! We also know of the bitterness and sense of betrayal that followed these struggles.

Power-seeking can so easily produce cheap loyalty, hollow friendships and easy betrayals – we have seen it here in our own country and we have seen it in the USA. In the last few days we have also seen it in South Africa. It is a universal phenomenon – not limited by either geography or history.

It was there with the disciples of Jesus, too. How could they be so wrong? How could they be so lacking in empathy with their friend, their teacher and their brother Jesus? How could their thoughts be so far from his thoughts as to fail to see what he was telling them?

James and John got a very curious answer to their request. Jesus did not rebuke them or get angry with them, he simply says, ‘can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?’ Our immediate response to hearing these words might be to link them to the Last Supper when Jesus did drink of the cup and did share bread and wine with his disciples. We shall return to that in a moment.

For the disciples, for all Jews steeped in Old Testament language, there was a clear reference in these words. The Old Testament prophets spoke repeatedly about the ‘cup of God’s wrath.’ In doing so they spoke as if God’s holy anger against people who are evil and acting against his wishes, was turned into sour wine which they will be forced to drink – ‘to drain to the dregs the wrath of God.’

But the real surprise in this answer of Jesus to James and John is that it is Jesus who is speaking of drinking this cup himself. No wonder the disciples were baffled. They were bent on power, prestige and position and yet here is their friend and Master speaking of the suffering ahead, of his ‘drinking the cup.’

With the benefit of hindsight we know what those disciples did not know at the time of this incident. We know that not only did Jesus suffer and die in Jerusalem as he had foretold but that, indeed, he was raised on the third day. We also know that these slow and uncomprehending disciples were transformed as they moved through the traumatic events of the Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. They came to understand that following Jesus was to give themselves up to a life of service and even suffering. James and John, as with the other disciples, did come to drink of that same cup from which Jesus had drunk. Their following of their Lord led them into different paths of service.

Life treated the two brothers very differently. James was the first of the apostolic band to suffer martyrdom for his faith and his following of Jesus. We read in Acts 12 the following words about James,

*“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.”*

For John life was very different. He lived to a ripe old age in the city of Ephesus and died, as far as we know, a natural death. For him, ‘drinking the cup’ was not the dramatic suffering of martyrdom but the constant discipline and struggle of seeking to follow his Master, lead a Christian life and be an evangelist for the ‘Good News.’

‘Drinking the cup’ may come in many different forms for us who seek to be followers of this Jesus, who turned worldly ideas of power and position upside down. Today we have worshipping with us 12 Ordinands from the New York area of the United Methodist Church. They now know where they will be serving and will shortly embark on their lifelong vocation as ministers of the Gospel.

For Kido, too, this is a transitional stage as he prepares to move as a probationer minister to his new Circuit in September.

For all of us in this season of Lent there is the question of where our Christian life will take us. If we were to think in terms of position and status that our faith and our membership of this Church may confer upon us, then we, like those first disciples, have got it all wrong.

‘Drinking the cup’ that Jesus drank may well mean different things for different people, as it was different for James and John but for all it means service, a willingness to be there for others, not for any praise or reward, but because that is the pattern of life to which Jesus calls us.

Shortly we shall gather around this Communion Table and take bread and drink wine. We shall recall Jesus/ last meal with his disciples and we shall drink from the cup from which he drank.

May God grant us a new understanding of his Kingdom, of our place in it and may he bless us in his service. Amen