

Year B: The Gospel: Mark 10: 35-45

James and Suzanne Last Service

Today's Gospel has a familiar theme: the disciples' inability to understand the nature of greatness, leadership and servanthood, in the Kingdom of God.

James and John saw the Kingdom as governed by the same rules as earthly ones - where Jesus would sit on a throne, making executive decisions, with his favourites, his most important followers, on his right and left. Jesus tells them that they do not fully realise what such a request might entail.

I had a similar situation on a FYT bus, going to the Archdeacon Peter's leaving service - with some folks disputing who should sit next to me, on the way. Perhaps, those wanted folks wanted to keep me company, just in case I got lonely on the way to Ryde... it is a long way to Ryde, 45mins in fact - it is never less but is often more! There is no route on google maps that will get me there any faster. And oh, how I have tried!

Now, the excitement of having one of the new Vicar's from West Wight, in a confined space, for 45mins produced lots of questions and conversations on our journey, from all directions - but I have to say there were some rowdy characters, and direct questioning from the back of the bus... you all know who you are...even if I could not see you! Haha!

On that evening, I made an executive decision to sit alone, so as not to offend anyone. But actually, it meant that I could keep eye on our two church wardens, who seemed far too cheerful, taking control at the front, as they drove us to our destination. Joyful, church leadership, whatever next!

In our gospel reading, inevitably, the desire for the favoured seats in the Kingdom caused indignation among the other disciples. And so, Jesus again teaches them all about the nature of greatness, leadership and servanthood.

I love how often, when Jesus encounters a dispute, he turns to the crowd to teach all around him. He takes all on the journey of further understanding, not just those who have posed the challenge or the question; but all who need to have fresh understanding, together.

It has to be a recognition, for us all that the temptation which affected James and John and the other disciples, is never very far from the life of the Church, or any institution for which people lead and serve - and especially for those given license or responsibilities within it.

Many of us here today would perhaps say that we do not, or no longer have such authority in the decision making of the wider church or other organisations, but all of us have areas in our life where we may be tempted to wield our own self-importance. This may be in families - or in work-places - or on committees, or even in retirement; in anything that tempts us to use an authoritarian approach to get things done.

However, if we look at the life of Jesus we find a very different model of authority. No-one could deny his effectiveness, nor that he changed the world, but he never lorded it over anyone or forced people to accept his teaching. In Jesus, people encountered the authority of a love that was prepared to give its life for them.

In fact, when Jesus came into his Kingdom, the places reserved were to given to a criminal, one on the right and another to his left... the suffering servant and saviour of the world becoming a sacrifice and a symbol of the forgiveness and offer of restored relationship with God - to all who would receive it.

We might say that today's gospel presents the disciples of Jesus in a bad light.

James and John, who are brothers, ask Jesus for a big favour. They want the premium seats, the ones right beside Jesus, when he finally is enthroned as King. They want to see the fulfilment of the Kingdom. It would seem that they have a strong appetite for prestige and power.

The other ten disciples are no better. They become angry at James and John because perhaps deep down... they also want the place next to their leader. All twelve disciples miss the point about the kingship of Jesus. Although he has told them repeatedly of his approaching execution and resurrection, they just do not get it.

In contrast to their misunderstanding, stories appear shortly before and after today's gospel where Jesus heals blind people. We hear of the first blind person healed that "He looked intently, and was restored, and saw everyone clearly" (8:25).

We hear of the second blind person Jesus healed that he "received his sight, and followed Jesus in the way," in other words, became a disciple (10:52).

But as for the twelve, they do not see everything clearly. They continue to miss the point, their following of Jesus on the way is handicapped by persistent blindness.

And yet, the failure of the twelve to understand can be for us, a cause of hope. For each of one us is sometimes blind to what discipleship requires of us!

How are you following Jesus today? Where are you blind sighted in understanding of his will for your life and responding to that call from God and in your relationships with others? Are you in the place and position that God has called you to explore?

Perhaps your question today, is about where you fit into vision of God's work, in the emerging mission community of West Wight; and need to ask a challenging question, before God.

What I love about James and John, is that in Mark's gospel...they do eventually ask the question that is on everyone's lips...the muttering in the background.

Jesus doesn't mind tough questions and especially those where we need to explore our sense of the bigger picture. But we are asked to explore the challenges we face, in an attitude of prayer. Seeking always to be part of a renewed relationship, with others and God, when the challenges become tough.

Perhaps, also we are traditionally in our interpretation, a little harsh on James and John, on wanting to remain in relationship with Jesus, close to him...close at hand!

For we all have those people in our lives that attract and draw us to them. Their lives speak to us of love and friendship.

They show us something about ourselves and of God. Their presence changes who we are. They call from us the best part of who we are.

In them we catch a glimpse of something holy, something meaningful, something that gives life. We want to get as close as we can. We don't want to let it slip away.

We want to be next to them not because of who we want to be but because of who we become and are becoming alongside them...

James and Suzanne have sat and walked and journeyed alongside so many of you in West Wight; and together you have both glimpsed and grown in discipleship.

Something holy, something meaningful, something that gives life...has emerged, as you have journeyed together in exploring the full life that Christ offers to each one of us.

This emerging full life is what James and John have experienced with Jesus...a journey, exploring their calling, their purpose, their gifts; losing the fear of asking the questions that have yet to be answered, of testing out the way forward, without their leader and their friend.

Their journey began, that day at the Sea of Galilee. They caught a glimpse of something in and about Jesus that allowed them to leave their boat, their nets, and their family. They along with Peter would become the inner circle of Jesus' disciples.

They were the ones permitted to see Jairus' daughter restored to life. They were the ones Jesus took up on the mountain to witness his transfiguration.

They have seen things the others did not.

They had an expectation of seeing so much more...but they did not expect Jesus to leave them. They do not want to lose the life they have experienced with him, on the way.

It is very hard for us too, to let go of those who have walked the way of discipleship with us. And today, I have no doubt that many of you will be wanting to sit and stand, not only to the left and right of James and Suzanne - but also to surround them, to pray for them and to thank them for their faithful

service and commitment to Christ Church and the whole emerging mission community of West Wight.

Also today we give thanks for James, as a church leader, who with Suzanne, alongside has encouraged and enabled many to do their part for the Kingdom of God, in West Wight.

Over the last 5 years, James has invited all to embrace the call of God, on their lives. A hard act to follow, some might say - but follow on we must!

It is time for us, to move forward in God's mission for this place and this time. Not just for one or two, or even 12, often dazed and confused disciples -but for each one of us. Coming with our gifts, our calling and our challenging questions. Following God's good plan and purpose for all here today; and especially for those who need to know the love of Jesus Christ, the saviour of the world for us all! Amen!

