

MARK 10:35-45
THE SERVANT!

“I want...” What do we tell children when they say that? “I want doesn’t get!” Here’s another: “You must...” I was in a conversation a few years ago about some of the big, controversial issues in the Church of Scotland and there were some smaller conversations as part of the big one; different opinions were being expressed and the person with whom I was in conversation, several times said “you must...” It felt like I was being told what I had to do and that I had to change my mind and my opinion to suit him. When I challenged him, he said something like “I’m speaking to myself as well”, but that’s not how it felt from my seat! Pride and power; selfishness and self-centredness; wanting our own way in everything; being in charge and in control – perhaps our nature, our character takes us that way; perhaps the world in which we live encourages us to go that way. Church, at times, has the trappings of power; even in the church will find people abusing power, bullying; “I want...”; “you must...”

James and John were brothers; they were fishermen from Galilee, probably business partners with Peter and Andrew; all four of them were called to leave the fishing to follow Jesus. They did follow Jesus and became part of the group of twelve, the disciples who would be closest to Jesus. Jesus gave them a nickname, “Sons of Thunder”, which might well suggest a fiery temperament, that they were ready to blow up and thunder their anger at whoever was in their path; certainly they were ready to call down fire from heaven to destroy a Samaritan village that refused to welcome Jesus. They are a work in progress: here are disciples who are not only learning about God and Jesus, but are learning about themselves and what kind of people they need to be. It is painful learning, because they are made to take a long, hard look at themselves in the mirror, to see where they fall down, to see what needs to change.

It began with a conversation. James and John come to Jesus with a request. “Teacher...” (*Mark 10:35*) They are acting together in this request; “we want”; Matthew’s version has this request coming from their mother; she wants something for them. “What...” (*Mark 10:36f*) Wow! This is not a small request. Jesus is King and one day, they know, He will be a King in glory; this is all part of their faith in Jesus as Messiah. The Messiah is a great King who will reign and rule over all the world and all of creation. That’s all right, so far. But then, their request: “we want the best seats in the house! We want seats numbers two and three”; assuming that Jesus has seat number one. It is no surprise whatsoever that the others were “indignant”; is that a polite way of saying that they went ballistic at James and John? There was a rather heated discussion for two reasons: firstly, they were cross with James and John for making an assumption that they were better than rest; secondly, maybe, secretly, had they hopes for these seats two and three as well? James and John want the top seats; these are seats of power and prestige in the kingdom of God, places of recognition and prominence.

Before we condemn James and John for their request, the church is still a place of power and prestige. We use the language of power when we talk about ‘thrones’ and when people wear gold and silver garments. But even without these trappings, we fall out because we’re not given our ‘place’ or our contribution is not ‘recognised’ in a way that shows everyone how good we are. A few years ago I came across a Church magazine where the treasurer listed the members of congregation and how much money they had given to the church in the last quarter – how can that be abused, as a way of showing myself to be top of the league and better than all the rest! Why? Because human nature, by instinct, teaches us to look after ‘me’ first and never mind

all the rest; we'll do anything to get own way and be top; it happens in church in the same way as anywhere else, to our shame.

Jesus has a different way; if we are to be disciples need to take that seriously. To James and John, He says: "*Can you...*" (Mark 10:38) These are pictures of suffering: Jesus will be a King who suffers and dies; the cross is not that far away! "Can you go that way, rather than way of power and prestige?" To their credit, they say "we can" and they did. James was martyred by Herod, the story told in Acts chapter 12, and John spent his last days on the island of Patmos, in exile for his faith, both of them persecuted, suffering for their faith; drinking the cup that Jesus drank! To the disciples as a whole, He says: "*Whoever...*" (Mark 10:43ff) Service, not power; humility, not prestige - Jesus' way is different. He will do this Himself; He will humble Himself, serve and give His life for the sake of others, for our sake. Disciples are to copy Him, to learn to serve, to learn to be humble; to learn to curb our human instincts; James and John had to learn to control their thundery temperaments and humbly serve others. James gave his life for Jesus and for the Church; John was known as the apostle of love; they changed to become more like Jesus.

Jesus way is still different. Are you a thundery person, ready to fly off the handle at the smallest thing? Or it might be something else. Your instinct might be to want to know everything about everyone else's business because knowledge is power and you can gossip to others because you know, or think you know. Or it might be to get your own way all of time, or to bully others into submission. There are all kinds of human characteristics that feed off the desire to get our own way and to be top of the heap and to use that power to force others into submission. Jesus' way is different and it is no excuse to say "that is just way I am!" Jesus challenges us to change, to be humble servants of one another, to care for one another, to put others first. That's what He did on cross; that's what He calls us to be and do in our lives. We are clearly a work in progress; we have to admit that; but we also have to embrace change to be more and more like Jesus.

We are going to celebrate communion in a few moments. At the centre of that service is the cross. It is all about Jesus on the cross, the Saviour who gave His life for us. The cross is the place where our salvation is achieved and communion is way of renewing our faith in Jesus, the crucified Saviour and risen Lord. The cross is the place where Jesus embodied this whole humble servant idea, where He humbled Himself, and served us. Our lives need to be cross-shaped: we are not just to believe in a Saviour who was crucified, but to live as if we are His disciples. Our lives need to be marked by humble service, considering others before ourselves; looking to give others their place rather than wanting our own way; thinking about the implication for others about what we say before we say anything; walking a mile in someone else's shoes to understand how they feel. We'll nod our heads and say "yes, this is a good idea!" but it's not meant as a good idea; it's meant as the way for us to be and actually how we are to live. Be humble; serve one another in the spirit and in the way of Jesus and His cross.