

SERMON BY LORNA SOUTER

MARK 10: 35-45 and
 ISAIAH 53:4-12
 TO SEE OR NOT TO SEE

An iceberg – amazing, majestic forms of ice that roam mainly in the seas off Greenland and in the Antarctic. At once beautiful and lethal, as many a ship has discovered over the years. “Tip of the iceberg” is a phrase that has slipped into common use, because the most renowned feature of icebergs is that usually most of their vast structure lies hidden beneath the water line. We see what lies above the waterline and often forget all that lies beneath.

As we join Jesus and the disciples on the road up to Jerusalem in our passage from Mark, there is a sense in which the disciples are as yet only seeing the tip of the iceberg when it comes to understanding who Jesus truly is and what he has come to do. On their journey of discovery, there is still so much more for them to discern of the far greater dimensions of Jesus’ identity and quest than they have at first understood.

And so we come to James and John’s rather extraordinary request. Extraordinary, because you wonder how they could dare to make such an overwhelmingly arrogant and self-centred demand of Jesus, to be allowed to sit on his right and left in his glory. And yet, as you look through the earlier chapters of the gospel, there are a few factors that possibly gave them the confidence to ask

They were amongst the first disciples to be chosen; Jesus gave them the name “Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17), which, although a little uncertain in origin, has the suggestion that they were both strong, impetuous characters; and along with Peter, they formed the small inner core of disciples whom Jesus took with him on particular special occasions – eg, the healing of Jairus’s daughter (ch 5) and witnessing Jesus transfiguration (ch 9), which gave them a glimpse already of his glory. With all of that pieced together, they may both have had the sense that they were already amongst Jesus’s favourites.

Whether that is the case or not, their request is still very jarring. In the verses immediately before this passage, Jesus has once again predicted the events that lie ahead for him surrounding his death, trying to explain the sacrificial path that he is on. But then, ... the next thing that happens - James and John are standing there in front of him with nothing else to think about but to ask for the 2 places of greatest honour on either side of him in his glory. In creating that flow in the gospel account, Mark dramatically highlights the disciples’ inability, or perhaps unwillingness at this stage, to see and understand what Jesus is talking about. It is after all the third time in the gospel account that Jesus has spoken about his death to the disciples and tried to prepare them for what is coming and later in the passage, it’s the second time that he has had to take them up on the issue of what it means to be great – but they are just not taking it in. Jesus is talking on one level and the disciples are understanding on a very different level.

The disciples’ perceptions are based on what they humanly anticipate to be the climax of Jesus’ mission. They have been enjoying Jesus’s success and the adulation from the crowd at his teaching, the miracles he has performed and the healings he has done. On the back of this, Peter has declared Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah, who, under the popular understanding of this role, had come to free his people from Roman oppression. For the disciples, there’s an anticipation that in just a short time when Jesus reaches Jerusalem, carried along by all the expectations and support of the crowd, he will bring about a glorious victory over the Roman authorities and James and John and the other disciples will be there to share in that and bask in Jesus’s glory too. At the moment, Jesus’ predictions of his suffering and death just don’t fit in anywhere for them.

And so, in response to James and John, Jesus firmly but graciously responds, “You don’t know what you are asking”. More than that, they don’t know what they are saying either when Jesus asks them: “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?” Quick as a flash they reply: “We can,” but they have no inkling as yet of what that means or involves. If it were just a matter of a march to glory, then, yes, James and John would be very ready to share in that prize.

But, in all this, the disciples are seeing only the iceberg above the water line – what's familiar, comfortable, safe; what fits with Israel's hopes and expectations and what fits with their own personal hopes and expectations. They have yet to discern all that lies below the water line in terms of who Jesus truly is and what he has come to do and how that will be accomplished. Yes, Jesus is Messiah, but not the popular version. Jesus is the Messiah of the suffering Servant passage in Isaiah 53, whose cup and baptism must involve being "pierced for our transgressions" and "crushed for our iniquities". Jesus comes as Saviour to a

fallen world who will take on himself God's judgement on sin and set people free through his death and rising again to know forgiveness and life through him,

But that wasn't a mission the disciples could or wanted to fathom at this stage. Flowing on from that too, they are as yet unable to fathom Jesus' instruction on what it means to be great in the Kingdom of God, in being willing to become a servant and slave of all. There's a rather comical scene in v 41, when the other disciples learn of James and John's request. Their indication stems not from the request having been made to Jesus but that they were also obviously jostling for those places of honour themselves. To the disciples, servants and slaves are at the very bottom of the heap, doing thankless tasks without status or recognition. Why was Jesus advocating such a menial, lowly path, when it seemed he was about to emerge centre stage and they were all standing on the threshold of untold prestige and glory at Jesus side? On their journey of discovery, it must all have seemed rather bewildering. They seem a long way off from accepting the upside down values of the Kingdom of God.

What will make the difference and help them begin to see the bigger picture that lies below the waterline? Nothing – nothing but to witness for themselves Jesus's death and resurrection and at that point their whole understanding and response and lives are turned upside down forever. Then they've seen God's Son come and in faithful obedience to his Father's will, give up his life on the Cross that all may be saved. They've begun to grasp the vast scope of love, of humility, of sacrifice shown by Jesus in the path he purposefully and selflessly followed. In the light of Jesus's supreme example of what it means to serve, they will leave behind all preoccupations with worldly greatness forever. Instead, they will find more lasting and far-reaching fulfilment in pursuing spiritual greatness by following in Jesus's footsteps and serving him. And, as Jesus states, for James and a number of the other disciples this would one day mean sharing in Jesus' ultimate sacrifice in giving up their own lives for the gospel.

Where does having a servant heart sit in our world today?

We still live in a world where at many different levels, people domineer and lord it over others for their own ends and satisfaction. From unjust regimes around the world, the leaders of many of the world banks; the ethos of 'The Apprentice' when it's on; down to the often impatient, selfish attitudes we may experience just going around our normal day - there is a general lack of care and consideration that seems pervasive today. A servant attitude is still an alien concept in an awful lot of our world today.

We might also say that, like the disciples' initial position, there are still those around us who, if they do think of Jesus at all, want to have him without the Cross, to see him as a good man with some excellent teaching on how best to live life in each generation. They hold onto what is comfortable in their perception of Jesus but block out the uncomfortable, disquieting shadow of the Cross. And yet to shut out the Cross, is to miss out on grasping the full extent of God's love for us.

Recently, when I was up in St Andrews for a candidates' conference, we were treated to a Q&A session with the new Moderator, Albert Bogle, on our last morning. He was suitably non-plussed by one of those questions that seem to keep coming up these days, "If you were a cake or biscuit, what would you be and why?" Evidently the past Moderator had chosen a custard cream, and after some thought, the present Moderator chose cheesecake. Before that, though, he had spoken about the needs of the Church and the people of Scotland and at one point he said: "People in the world know a lot about love, but on the whole they don't know anything about grace". Grace - the abundant, undeserved love of God, that lies at the heart of the Cross and at the heart of the upside, down, inside, out values of the Kingdom of God. In the wonder of grace, Jesus gave up everything for us to take our punishment upon himself, and lets us go free to receive forgiveness and life. That's amazing, abundant grace, affording a lifetime of reflection below the water line to take in its vast dimensions.

Like the disciples, Jesus becomes the model and inspiration for a life time of service to God. It's often not simple or easy to serve. It can be tiring and exacting; we go very much against the tide and sometimes our best efforts seem to come to nothing or are ignored or rejected. As well as the Spirit's help and strength on the way, there are a few other encouragements to note.

Jesus' service was never demeaning. Jesus' path of service was marked only by courage, strength and determination – “power under control” as one commentator puts it. As we follow in Jesus' footsteps, we

should never feel on the back foot in being willing to offer humble, loving examples of service today. There's no greater quest to be on.

It was Jesus's greatest desire and concern to faithfully serve and fulfil his Father's purpose that all might be saved; and it was God's greatest delight to honour his Son in obedience and selfless sacrifice, exalting him to the highest place and giving him the name that is above every name (Phil 2:9). In lives of ongoing service, we share in that mission that is closest to God's heart and to Jesus' heart. With the Spirit's enabling, we have the privilege of bringing God's grace to touch and transform the hardness, the restlessness, the uncertainty, the emptiness, the fear, the lostness and the brokenness of the world around us.

In John 17:22, Jesus says of those who follow in his path of service: “I have given them the glory that you gave me, ...” That's an amazing, wonderful, below the waterline fact that we tend to forget, that God's glory rests on those whose lives are spent in humble, loving service to him. We leave behind the pursuit of fleeting worldly greatness for something far more wonderful and lasting. It's a present blessing and as well as a future hope that we will one day experience the full glory of God in his presence at the end of our days.

In the words of Charles Wesley:

“Changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love and grace”.