

# 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

17.10.2021  
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## Introduction

This week's reading seems to be about power, but in fact, it is all about emotion. I wonder how often humans hide their emotions when trying to be professional, or holy, or important. We act as if these things are abstract, or objective, when in fact there is a great deal of emotion involved in the human interactions that place us in relationship to others.

As you read, does this story resonate with a situation you have found yourself in? At work? Or at church? Or are these two the same for you? What role did you have – were you Jesus, refusing to allocate the power and prestige sought by others? Were you James or John, asking for a role or position that was not to be yours? Or were you one of the other disciples, put out and angry because of the apparent arrogance or self-importance of the ones who had the audacity to ask?

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## Text

Mark 10:35-45

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus. "Teacher," they said, "there is something we want you to do for us." "What is it?" Jesus asked them. They answered, "When you sit on your throne in your glorious Kingdom, we want you to let us sit with you, one at your right and one at your left." Jesus said to them, "You don't know what you are asking for. Can you drink the cup of suffering that I must drink? Can you be baptized in the way I must be baptized?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink the cup I must drink and be baptized in the way I must be baptized. But I do not have the right to choose who will sit at my right and my left. It is God who will give these places to those for whom he has prepared them." When the other ten disciples heard about it, they became angry with James and John. So Jesus called them all together to him and said, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the heathen have power over them, and the leaders have complete authority. This, however, is not the way it is among you. If one of you wants to be great, you must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, you must be the slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life to redeem many people."

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Have you ever been in a position where you genuinely didn't know what you were asking for? It's a strange concept. With hindsight, we can often think of situations in which something we thought was a good idea at the time turned out not to be. Whose voices did we hear counselling us against the unwise move? Why did we ignore them?

In this story today, Jesus tells James and John that they don't know what they are asking for, and the cost of their request would be to 'drink the cup I must drink and be baptized in the way I must be baptized'. In plain English, he was saying they were going to suffer and die. Added to that, the perks they wanted in return (the highest seats in heaven) were not his to offer. God 'will give these places to those for whom he has prepared them'.

How do we measure our own importance? What are the key things we think we need? Is it a secretary to send emails for us? Or a certain form or order in worship, or a work title or job description at work? What's the difference between recognition, a healthy interpersonal respect which all humans need, and self-aggrandisement, a desire to be seen as greater than we are?

Key to this story is that James and John came to Jesus when he was alone. They wanted to ask for the best seats but must already have had some feeling that this question was not going to go down well with the other disciples. As we think of our own mistakes, or moments when we asked for something we later regretted, we might reflect on whether those requests were made in private or in public. Is not the privacy of the 'deal' or closed agreement one of those environments in which we can tempt ourselves to ask for more than we should, or cover our ambition in a professional veneer?

Whatever the truth, it didn't work out well. When the others heard, they 'became angry with James and John.' I wonder how the news travelled. Who listened to a conversation that was intended, by James and John at least, to be private. I wonder – was there a feeling in James' and John's hearts that someone had let them down, someone had spilled their secret? Especially as their conversation with Jesus hadn't exactly gone to plan, and the offer on the table was death without the glory.

For some of us, it may seem easy to walk this story in the footsteps of the angry disciples. The idea that others might look for advantage at our expense, or claim an honour that might have been ours, is seductive; placing ourselves on the side of the self-righteous and 'put-out' party is easier than remembering a day when we may have acted like James and John. However, in reading this text again we might want to ask ourselves if Jesus took that view? Were the angry ten really any better than the ambitious two?

Jesus then speaks some of the most famous phrases in the bible: "You know that those who are considered rulers of the heathen have power over them, and the leaders have complete authority. This, however, is not the way it is among you. If one of you wants to be great, you must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, you must be the slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life to redeem many people."

Jesus' definition of greatness has room for neither the angry ten, nor the ambitious two. It focuses instead on service. Indeed, not even free service in this translation: slavery, though a voluntary slavery, we must accept is a metaphor, a picture in words. He uses the Greek word 'servant' 'diakonos', and then in saying, 'you must be the slave of all', he uses the Greek word 'doulos'. There is a building emphasis in Jesus' words: service, then slavery, a turning around of the ideas of leadership and of rulers of the heathen. It isn't that we can't book good seats in heaven, it isn't even that we might get one but we don't know which, it is instead a kingdom on its head, a discipleship of service, even slavery.

If we think back to the day we asked for something we regretted, the day we were the ambitious two, how do we hear Jesus' words? Or if we think of the day we were in the angry ten, how does Jesus' call to service and even slavery speak into that moment? Here, the conflict may now be within us, but a conflict of spirituality is exactly what this passage describes. I wonder if the church will ever be free of it? Will we?

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## Response

Think of a role of service that you have undertaken. What did you do? Whom did you serve?

In what ways was that service an act of worship? Overtly? Or in your own heart?

How do we appreciate the service of others? As worship? In worship?

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## Prayer

God of mercy and grace, this week we bring before you the prayers folded in our hearts of service. We have listened to the voices of James and John, and heard their story. We pray for all whose stories echo this one: for those who climb up institutions, and may have neither opportunity nor inclination to act according to the good of the situation in front of them; and for the angry ten, who did not ask for favour: for those for whom answers to the tough questions become even tougher after compromising integrity with anger. Grant us the gift of service, to be those who choose neither to hold on to anger nor to push forward in ambition, that each day, as we become more like you, so too we move closer to you.

In and through the Servant of All,

Amen

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## Further Reading

The book *What Were You Arguing About Along The Way?* is a newly revised and edited collection of Spirituality of Conflict entries for years A, B and C. This volume contains introductions, reflections, responses and prayers for the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter.

Pat Bennett, the brilliant theologian, scientist and liturgist has spent hundreds of hours reading through the entries, selecting and editing those entries that work well together, and compiling them together in a volume of resources that is rich with support for everyone, whether using it in preparation for preaching, or for personal or group learning.

It'll be released from Canterbury Press in late November this year, just in time for Advent!

The ISBN is 978-1-78622-399-9

You'll be able to get it from all good bookshops, or online venues.

If you can order directly from Canterbury Press, or through your local bookshop, we'd be extra pleased!

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