**Mark 10:35-45**

**Hallmarks of discipleship**

I feel a bit sorry for James and John in this story from the Gospel, to be honest. I think they have had an unnecessarily harsh press throughout history because of this passage. They come to Jesus and, in verse 35, we read their request: “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you”. And then they get short shrift from Jesus and the rest of the disciples get angry with them. But in actual fact, they are only doing what Jesus had said to them previously. In Matthew 7:7, Jesus says, “Ask, and it shall be given to you…” In John 14:13, Jesus says, “I will do whatever you ask in my name…” So, to be fair to James and John, they must have been a bit confused by the whole situation. Jesus is telling the disciples to ask for things and then, when they do, they get told off and they go down through 2,000 years of history as being bad, selfish, egotistical people. It all seems a bit harsh, really…

And what about the request they make to Jesus: what do we make of this, in verse 36: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory”. Again, that doesn’t seem like an unreasonable request. They didn’t have the benefit of hindsight like we do. As far as they knew, Jesus would be heading to Jerusalem to set up the Kingdom of God by overthrowing Roman rule and renewing the role of the Temple in traditional Judaism. They were expecting political and spiritual conflict and they were being loyal to Jesus and standing with him in this new world order and so it seems only reasonable that they should think that some rewards will be given in the glorious time to come.

So I want us to be fair to James and John here and not demonise them as selfish, arrogant disciples who thought that they were deserving of the greatest honour. Instead, they were merely doing what Jesus had said for them to do: ask for things - and they were loyally standing with Jesus as he headed towards Jerusalem.

I think it’s helpful to see James and John like this because, in this way, I think we can identify better with them.

The truth is that most times when we pray and ask God for things, we are not being particularly arrogant or selfish or egotistical. We are merely expressing to God what we think we need for a happy life or expressing to God what we think would be helpful in a particular situation. Perhaps what we express is right, perhaps it is wrong: but it is rarely driven by arrogance and selfish ego.

Of course, we read in verse 41 that the other disciples were angry with them - but that’s not because their motivations were any different or purer than that of James and John but because they thought they might have been pipped at the post for the seats in glory and that they would be missing out for themselves.

So when we read Jesus’ words by way of response, I don’t think he is telling them off, actually. Instead, he is being gentle with them and he is using this opportunity to teach them what is important in the Kingdom of God: a lesson they needed to learn, and a lesson we need to be constantly reminded of. And what we need to be reminded of are the two hallmarks of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

And the first is this:

**1. To be a Christian means to totally submit ourselves to the will of God**

James and John had asked for positions of glory for their faithfulness to Jesus but, in verse 38, he simply says, “You do not know what you are asking”. And then he draws on two metaphors that James and John would have understood only too well: Jesus says, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

Well, the cup that Jesus was about to drink was suffering and death: he prays in Mark’s Gospel, “Lord, take this cup away from me”. And the notion of baptism in the contemporary Greek language of James and John’s day referred to being overcome with calamity and disaster, for example, in Luke 12:50, Jesus says, “I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!”

So Jesus is saying to James and John, “I am about to be overcome by a huge calamity through which I will suffer and die. Can you go through that?”

And what is the response that James and John give in verse 39? “We are able”.

Now how is that for courage of the first order? They have decided to stay with Jesus regardless of what he might suffer. So forget any sense that James and John are to be ridiculed or despised as a result of their selfish request in this passage. Instead, we should respect them and honour them for their courage and loyalty, despite knowing that calamity and suffering and death would befall them too.

And Jesus knows that, and he says to them in verse 39: “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized…” And Jesus was right. James was the first of the disciples to be martyred: in Acts 12:2, we read that “King Herod had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword”. And later, John was sent into exile onto the Island of Patmos after having been tortured by the Caesar at the time.

So both James and John did drink of the cup and they were baptized into suffering and yet both of them had said, “We are able”. In the face of such suffering, it would have been easy for them to walk away, it would have been easy for them to be bitter towards God because he had not given them what they requested, it would have been tempting for them to be angry with Jesus because he had robbed them of their dreams of glory. But they don’t do that. Instead, they humbly submit themselves to the will of God and they say that they are prepared to walk the way of Christ whatever the personal cost to themselves.

That can be a tough lesson for us to learn, can’t it? Sometimes, we might have spent so long being faithful to God or might have spent so much time and energy on a particular form of ministry that we think, like James and John, that we deserve a bit of a reward from God. And then, when the reward doesn’t come, or when life gets tough for us, we maybe grow bitter or angry towards God or we are tempted to walk away from the faith. We might think, “For goodness sake, God, I have given so much to this church for so long: I have put so much effort in, I have given so much money, I’ve hardly missed a week of worship, don’t I get something in return?” But as much as we may wish it to be otherwise that is not the way of Christian discipleship. It’s not how it works.

As Christians, we are called to submit ourselves totally to the will of God. Full stop. Maybe good things will come our way, maybe they won’t. But our task is to submit and to follow without seeking a reward.

When we read the Gospel stories, there are two people who were placed on the left hand and right hand of Jesus as he was glorified: the two thieves who were crucified with him on the cross. If you want to sit at Jesus’ left side or right side, then you too must be prepared to be crucified – to die to self and then, that honour will be yours…

So first, then, we learn that Christian discipleship is hallmarked by a complete submission to the will of God, without the hope of reward. And secondly,

**2. The life of Christian discipleship is hallmarked by serving others**

In verse 43, Jesus says, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all”.

Now this, of course, is a completely counter-cultural idea as much today as it was 2,000 years ago in Jesus’ time. There is a contradiction in terms in verse 42, where Jesus says that the Gentile rulers “lord it over” others. In the Kingdom of God, it is impossible to ‘lord it over’: instead, we ‘lord it under’.

What I mean is that, Lordship and authority are shown through servanthood, not through claiming power over people. As Jesus says in verse 45, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve…” And Jesus is making his point really clearly here: he doesn’t refer to ‘the Son of God’, which may have put him over human beings. Instead, he refers to ‘the Son of Man’, which is far more servant-like.

Jesus’ way is to ‘lord it under us’, not to ‘lord it over us’.

And if we want to be faithful Christians, then we too must constantly seek ways to ‘lord it under’ others: to serve others and to put others above ourselves at all times. That is the way of Christ. That is the way of Christian discipleship. Martin Luther King once wrote, “Life’s most urgent question is this: ‘What are you doing for others?’”

To lord it under others is the life to which we are all called and that is what is modeled to us in the life of Jesus himself who came to give his life as a ransom for many.

So in conclusion then, this passage from the Gospels is not really a story about selfish desires at all. It is not a story that allows us permission to think of James and John as arrogant, self-centred people who were out to get whatever they could from Jesus. Instead, they are good and honest followers of Jesus who were merely doing what they thought it was alright to do in asking Jesus for anything they wanted – as he had instructed them to do. But in doing that, Jesus has an important lesson to teach them – and to teach us about the true nature of Christian discipleship.

Being a follower of Jesus is not about reaping rich rewards for having so faithfully served him for so many years or for having been dedicated to his church over a long period of time through the giving of time and money, energy and effort. Christian discipleship is not about reward at all.

Instead, Christian discipleship is about total obedience to the will of God, whether that leads to good things or bad, easy times or hard: we don’t become bitter or angry, we don’t give in to the temptation to give up…Instead, we endure all things in our walk with Christ.

And secondly, we do not lord it over others but instead try to find ways to lord it under them: to be the servant and the slave of all rather than trying to become an authority figure over them. That is the way of Christ. That is the way of Christian discipleship.

There is a beautiful prayer used in the Methodist Church at the start of every calendar year in which Christians offer themselves back to God. I leave us with it this morning as words that may inspire in us the desire to grow in the spirit of discipleship that Jesus outlines for us here, so that our lives may more fully reflect the way of Christ, the way of the Kingdom of God. The prayer goes like this:

*“Lord God, I am no longer my own but yours.*

*Put me to what you will,*

*rank me with whom you will;*

*put me to doing, put me to suffering;*

*let me be employed for you or laid aside for you,*

*exalted for you or brought low for you.*

*Let me be full, let me be empty,*

*let me have all things, let me have nothing.*

*I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things*

*to your pleasure and disposal. Amen.”*