

## *Following Jesus: Leadership of Suffering*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost—20 October 2024

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*Job 38.1-7; Psalm 104.1-10; Hebrews 5.1-10; Mark 10.35-45*

### INTRODUCTION

I am going to tell you a proud Grandpa story. I have already bored some of you with it already. However, I am totally unapologetic.

One of my grandsons studying musical theatre at the Elder conservatorium, University of Adelaide, recently played Herod in public performances of their production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. He was also the assistant director.

The high priest, ironically clothed in stunning faux-Nazi costume exuding power, sends Jesus to Herod Antipas (of John the Baptist fame). Jesus is thrown to the ground as he awaits the glorious arrival of Herod.

The lights go up and the vaudeville dancing girls take to the stage in net stockings and high heels. Herod emerges in top hat and tails, stick and dancing pumps and proceeds to try the prisoner, Jesus.

The audience erupted. I was stunned. These young men and women, through the medium of the musical, understood the NT better than most clergy.

So, what was the question James and John asked?

### THE REQUEST: JAMES AND JOHN

“We want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

Do you spot it? Can you tell what is coming? This is old fashioned paganism; you (the god, whoever you are) do what we ask. We want control in your realm just like we want to control ours. Give us some of your power.

What we want is the power to control our future and have a guaranteed share in your glorious victory.

### JESUS' QUESTION

Jesus, as ever, spots the deceit here. “What is it you want me to do for you?”

Jesus requires his disciples to explain clearly what they want. Jesus wants transparency of heart and mind; clarity so all can see and understand. Jesus calls it purity of heart. They need to be very clear about what is going on for them in this petition.

This is an illustration of the terrifying process of prayer. Prayer means opening up for ourselves the clear display of the human heart. Prayer is petition and painful revelation at one and the same time.

### JAMES AND JOHN'S RESPONSE

Their response is a painful revelation that has haunted the political culture of every variety and the church to this very day

“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”

The irony is that, in Mark's telling, Jesus has, moments before, told his disciples he is going up to Jerusalem to face the powers of politics and violence and be crucified (Mk 10.32-34). And that for the third time. They have learnt nothing.

But the human desire to manipulate the power of the divine for our own advantage over others and the destruction of others seems beyond human control. The Zebedees are both blind and deaf.

Their request is overtly about political power. They want the power of the Herod, the Sadducees, the Romans. They are happy to grant Jesus his role as the leader but they want cabinet positions no. 1 and no. 2.

It is overwhelmingly gobsmacking. James and John want a march to glory. It has to be a march of violence, for it can be no other.

This is true worldliness. Worldliness is often trivialized in modern Christianity into minor moral peccadilloes. But not here. Worldliness is the acceptance of violence as the voice of God and the road to true power.

#### JESUS' ANSWER

Jesus' response is not outrage and wrath but engagement. "You do not know what you are asking."

And the reason for that is that it is not his gift to give. It belongs to the Father.

Job and the Psalmist indicate why that might be.

In the passage we read this morning God is putting on trial Job's friends or inquisitors. Their arrogance is that they think they know the mind of God and can put everything to rights. God questions their arrogant wisdom.

The Psalm puts the same arrogant human wisdom on trial by exposing the true nature of God's creation; designed for its own independence, separate from human beings. Our power and violence, our violent wisdom brings creation to its knees. That is the limit of our wisdom.

So, Jesus is saying to James and John, "Your desire for power that leads to violence sets nothing to rights."

The second part of Jesus' answer is the more telling and takes us further. He frames it as a question that will engage the disciples in a new way of seeing.

"Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

The cup is a metaphor they would have been familiar with. It is a picture of human wilful violence and destruction that ends in death. Somehow in the cross that is the cup that must be drunk to the dregs ending only one way, in death. In some way, springing deep from the heart of God's love, the dregs of human violence are taken on in their full force and overcome.

The cost is the cross where it seems God is gloriously defeated.

I remind you that we take a cup today, a seal of great joy and hope arising from great suffering. A reminder of our vocation.

Baptism has its roots in Christ's baptism. His baptism has its roots in the suffering servant of Isaiah. He is the Spirit-inspired Servant who suffers violence at the hands of those who sit on the right or left hand of the powerful.

But that is the vocation of the cross. That is the only way that humans can be set free.

We have been baptised. We take a cup, the cup of life and promise.

#### THE ANGRY TEN

It doesn't take long for the others to hear what's been going on. And their response is an angry: "No-one likes tall poppies", or even more nasty descriptions that might be applied to James and John.

Now Jesus lays it all on the line.

The gospel of the cross challenges and subverts all the human systems which claim to put the world to rights but only ever succeed in bringing a different set of humans out on top.

"The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many".

Suffering service alone subverts violence and sets people free. That is the vocation of baptism. That is the cup of hope and promise.

The cross is about God putting the world and us to rights. It begins with our forgiveness, our repentance, our life in the Spirit. It begins with our turning upside down and inside out at our baptism and Eucharist.

But this turns upside down and inside out all the common ideas of human power and glory. The cross calls into question every political system. It is a seriously dangerous idea and life.

#### CONCLUSION

I began with *Jesus Christ Superstar*. There are two narratives. There is the vaudeville of violence or the Jesus narrative.

If we choose the Jesus narrative one thing is essential. We must tell and live the Christian narrative as a constant and subversive counternarrative. It must become a ceaseless interruption and riposte to every other story.