

*St Brandon's, Sermon for 21st October 2018. Isaiah 53:4-12
Hebrew 5:1-10, Mark 10:35-45*

Suffering and Serving

Alison Hobbs

Today's readings make some very difficult and very important points that raise some big questions. So perhaps its a good thing we are having a sermon discussion afterwards?!

Today's gospel reading focusses on another of those moments when Jesus' disciples make a blunder, and expose their inability to understand what Jesus has been trying to teach them, but they are not ready to understand, and we are likely not ready to understand even though we have the advantage of knowing how the story continues. Because, surprise, surprise, Jesus is turning upside down the accepted and 'normal' way of understanding power, and reward.

He is modelling a very hard path for the disciples and therefore us, to follow.

Is it really meant to be as harsh as Jesus makes it sound to James and John, or is it possible for it to be a gentler route: can we avoid drinking from the bitter cup and still be true followers of Christ?

So what's so awful about the question James and John, the twins, ask Jesus?

It sounds embarrassingly reasonable, on the surface, if a bit pushy.

Pushy because they want Jesus to agree initially to grant them anything they ask for: that's not one that any seasoned parent or

leader is going to fall for! No, better to get to the nub of it:

“What is it you want me to do for you?”

(I daresay he has a fairly good idea!). And they said to him, *“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”*

I wonder what picture they had in their head when they asked this?

Its hard to tell from the bible narrative, their asking follows immediately after Jesus has clearly spelt out the fate that awaits him in Jerusalem: betrayal, death and resurrection.

So what are they meaning they want?

I think they simply don't hear, don't understand or take on board any of what Jesus has just said – although we are told there is an air of fear about the disciples collectively at Jesus' determination to reach Jerusalem.

I imagine that James and John, quite simply, want a bit of thanks and recognition for being faithful followers, for putting themselves in the way of danger, for trying to go where Jesus leads and where they try to follow. Perhaps an overwhelming moment of love and bravado makes them long to be given the chance to be his right (and left) hand men.

Certainly, that, to me, would be very human and understandable. Its normal to want appreciation and recognition for our efforts, for our efforts to bring us some form of status.

This is the reward, the payback that seems reasonable, earned.

(Incidentally, do we anywhere find Jesus wanting this sort of recognition?)

Not surprisingly, the other disciples, when they hear about James & John's request get angry.

How presumptuous of James and John to set themselves above them, to ask for special recognition, to suggest that they deserve more than the other ten.

Maybe it raises in them the worry that *they* might be overlooked, that they having not spoken up boldly are going to miss out on an opportunity.

Jesus, addresses James and John first. I don't hear his response as angry, I hear it as frustrated at most, but mainly, as a reasonable, patient but challenging question back to them:

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

We know what he is alluding to, we know the agony to come in the Garden of Gethsemane and the appeal he will make to his father to take the cup away if it is his will; the reference he will make to the cup as his blood of the new covenant, poured out for many. The baptism that drove him straight into the wilderness for forty days of testing.

If we have not quite got the picture from the gospel reading, the lectionary reinforces it by putting alongside, the Isaiah passage of the suffering servant.

Although this was written something like 500 years before Christ, as Christians we cannot help but hear a spooky similarity to Jesus as he faced the cross, and the understanding we have about what the cross achieved in the way of redeeming us from our sins. Phrases from this passage have been lifted into the New Testament writings and into our liturgy which increases the resonance. But the writers of the New Testament understood it as having prophetic qualities, and that is how we are meant to hear it, too. To be given a commentary on the suffering, and the submission to suffering, just as Jesus, faced with the cup in Gethsemane submitted, *“Yet not what I want but what you want”*.

Jesus' response to James and John sounds as though the need for suffering is inextricably linked to serving, to fully following, as modelled by Jesus. Might that be the case?

We shy away from suffering, no-one would willingly choose it, yet experience shows us that going through the darkest times brings a new vision and appreciation of what light is about. When our world and our security is rocked, there emerges a new clarity about what is important.

What matters most.

What is of lasting value.

Love distils and points out the truths about itself.

Through painful loss, our world is diminished, yet through that and despite that, painfully we grow. Sometimes the growth is negative, producing bitterness and turning in on itself.

But often, miraculously, it is a growth in sensitivity to others' suffering, in patience and resilience, in generosity: in the fruit of the Spirit. And in generous, sacrificial giving.

Can I really be advocating suffering as desirable?

No, it would be cheap of me to presume that it was anything other than the last thing I would wish on anyone.

Yet, experience does show that it changes people.

Are we to conclude that God is desiring us to suffer in order that we should become better people, in order that we can serve others better? After all, the passage from Isaiah says "*he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities*". "*it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain*". And he asked that of his own son – his own self, willingly.

His willingness and submission allows him to draw alongside those who suffer today, to have the right – which I cannot claim – of saying he understands, he has been there himself. And of saying that God, the Father, remained faithful and brought him and all humanity to new life through that submission to suffering. There is an ambivalence.

However, I cannot believe in a God who asks for suffering as a necessary condition of following him. I can believe in a God who can use the inevitably painful times in our human lives to show us how great his love is, how precious human love is, how all important is the way we express, and receive, and give of his love for us, to others. A God who does not – cannot – simply intervene and remove or reverse the suffering that occurs, but can harness it for his own purposes.

Jesus' answer to James and John asks if they are able to follow in his suffering, to undergo, willingly, that formation through pain.

Is this the only route?

We cannot choose to avoid pain in our lives, its not in our control, but the amount we encounter seems pretty randomly doled out: some of us seem to get away much lighter than others.

Does that prevent us from growing into full discipleship? Is the pain the only route?

Jesus' response to the disciples' anger suggests another avenue for the disciples.

By giving up all wish to have power and recognition, being indifferent to that desire for appreciation and status and putting first the needs of others, promoting them over us.

Being the servant to all.

Pursuing the greatness and power that Jesus modelled, following his mission and aspiration: he who *“came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”*

Instead of having our wills broken by circumstances of suffering, being opened afresh to God’s love and message when broken by pain, this requires us to voluntarily lay down our comforts, and our self-centredness.

To voluntarily make time and space for God to break in.

To submit to what he might be asking us to do.

To hand everything we hold over to him.

Knowing and acknowledging our need of him, instead of knowing how capable we are.

That is tough, requires immense discipline/discipleship - offered to all of us, beyond most of us.

We ask for this route every time we pray the Lord’s prayer: for his will to be done, given our daily bread and not taken to the time of trial.

Being servants to others is to voluntarily put our preferences and prejudices aside and make time and space for practical love and help, to charitably reduce the suffering of others, with no requirement for repayment.

It’s a hard ask yet we do see these actions happening all around us.

This place abounds with people who are ready to go the extra mile, lend a helping hand, visit the lonely, feed the hungry.

It is encouraging and humbling in equal measure to hear what a lot of love is offered in support of others.

There is a famous and challenging prayer that illustrates this route, it is not a comfortable ride; can we make it our own?
I shall close with it:

*Dearest Jesus, teach us to be generous,
to serve you as you deserve to be served,
to give and not to count the cost,
to fight and not to heed the wounds,
to toil and not to seek for rest,
to labour and to ask for no reward
except that of knowing that we do your holy will.*