

# The Request of James and John

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*The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 21 October 2018 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster*

*Mk: 10:35-45*

Why is it I wonder that religion seems to cause so much trouble?

Why do some people blow themselves up along with dozens of others in the name of God?

Why do so many sensible people think that religion inevitably causes conflict?

Well I think the answer to all of those questions can be found in this morning's gospel reading, where we find two attitudes to religion which turn out to be incompatible.

The way the disciples see it - they love God and because they love God, when the moment is right, God will give them power over their enemies. So when James and John come to Jesus and ask him a favour and he says "What is it?", they say "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left in your glory".

In other words,

*"When your power is revealed, Jesus, we would like a slice of it please. We would like to sit on little thrones next to your big throne. We would like to rule over others in your name, and because we love you and we love God, that would be a good idea, right? Put your loyal lieutenants in the key positions and we can we can get things done, couldn't we? We could make this kingdom of God you keep talking about a reality. There'd be no more poverty, no more injustice, and we'd clear the beggars and the homeless of the streets and the trains would run on time and anyone who tried to stop us would be powerless. In fact if they persisted, we'd lock them up. And while we're about it, we'll drive the Romans into the sea and give them a taste of their own medicine. And we'll set our own people free and we'll make Judea great again and I'll tell you, it's going to be terrific!"*

The other disciples do get into a great argument with James and John about this, but only it seems because James and John got to Jesus first, and not because they thought the basic idea was wrong.

And it's the fundamental problem with religion the world over - every religion in every culture in every century: if you love God, you think you must be right and if you love God and think you're right, then it's your duty to make everyone else conform because in the end that'll be in their best interests, whether they realise it or not.

And so love for God quickly descends into intolerance and oppression and ultimately violence.

And there are times when I feel ashamed to be a Christian, because the journey from the love of God to violence and injustice seems so short and so swift.

It is so often the church has been on the wrong side of history, because it has been on the side of the oppressors, thinking that in hanging on to power and defending the status quo and sticking with the vested interests, it was serving God.

Notice that there is no reason to doubt that James and John's love for God is sincere; they really do love God and they really do want to be with Jesus and they really are loyal and committed. They're not playing games and they don't have particularly dark motives. They really believe it, which is precisely why it's so dangerous and so scary.

You see, I think what they got wrong is their understanding of who God is. James and John and all religious people of every faith who follow their example have made the mistake of thinking that God is power, when what Jesus is trying to show them is that God is love.

If God is power, then when we worship God, we are worshipping power and telling ourselves that power matters more than anything else.

And when people in authority encourage religion, it's because they want God to legitimise and validate the regime; to place the state beyond criticism and then if you criticise the leader, you are an effect criticising God. It may even be a crime, a blasphemy. It was what Hitler did with the German state church in the 1930s; it was what Stalin eventually did with the Russian Orthodox church in the 1940s; it was

what medieval kings and emperors did; it is what President Trump is doing with evangelical Christians in the United States today.

If God is power, then God is on the side of those in authority and woe betide any minority, any heretic or dissenter, anyone who doesn't kowtow to the regime.

And if God is power, then the church will want to cosy up to those in authority in order to gain or hang on to its credibility and Influence.

But Jesus questions this whole way of thinking, this understanding of a God of power when he asks "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink? Or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? You don't understand what you're asking for."

As the very least, Jesus here is suggesting that His understanding of power isn't like that of James and John, because the cup of which Jesus speaks, is not the cup of victory and triumph in the way that James and John think.

The Old Testament speaks of the cup of "Gods Wrath", the cup of judgement which will make the nations stagger as if drunk because of their sins, and not least, the sin of abusing power.

And when Jesus speaks of drinking this cup, he means that his death on the cross will drain away the sins of the world.

It is the cup of suffering which he willingly quaffs out of love for the world.

God's power in reality is the Power of Love, which stands alongside us in our cages of power and in our powerlessness, so that we might be set free from the illusion of strength and follow him rather in trust and humility.

James and John do indeed share Jesus' cup in the end because in following him they eventually are martyred.

But they don't take up places on Jesus' right hand or on his left, because Jesus' true throne turns out to be the cross and those on his right and on his left are the two criminals crucified with him - an image which is the very opposite of worldly power. And yet the cross is Christ's throne, the place where the love of God is revealed in all its costly, sacrificial glory. Where death is defeated, faithfulness to God is honoured and love triumphs in resurrection.

So I wonder which god do you love? Is it the God initially loved by James and John, the god of the love of power, who will puff you up for a bit to make you feel important but then will make you suspicious of others because their power threatened yours?

Or do you love the God who revealed the power of love on the cross, who declares that whoever would be great must become a servant and whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all.

It is no good talking about religion as if it is either good or bad, either the problem or the solution.

We have to be discerning because there is religion that is purely toxic, that has formed an unholy alliance with the oppressive power structures of this world. And we should be standing alongside every atheist in attacking it, just as prophets like Jeremiah attacked the corrupt alliance of temple and monarchy in the Old Testament.

But there is also the religion revealed by Jesus, the religion of self giving love which offers something truly different: trust in place of power; faith instead of fear; healing in place of division; justice and generosity in place of oppression and greed.

The coming of Jesus radically changes the way we think about God, because the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many, not to enslave in the name of God but to set free.

So when we approach Him, we draw near as we mean to go on, not demanding thrones but holding out empty hands; not asserting our independence but asking for help to overcome our unbelief; not trying to get at the 'trough' first to the exclusion of others but kneeling together in communion with one another and with the God whose power is known only in love.

We meet him in vulnerability and we love him not because his power is like ours only stronger. We love him because he first loved us and draws our response from the vulnerability of the cross: healing; setting free; inviting you and me to follow Him in humility with the poor and with the blind, and with the released captives and those who seem foolish in the eyes of the world.

We are invited to follow him trusting that the power of His love is stronger and more real than any power you can find in this world.

So let's come to Him afresh this morning, allow him to take the scales from our eyes that we may see Him as he truly is. That we may follow Him and trust His promise that His love is powerful enough truly to set us free.