

We are pilgrims on a journey ...

... let me be as Christ to you

A sermon given on Eighth Sunday After Trinity, 25th July 2021, by the Associate Vicar, the Revd Wendy Wale, in the Online Attended Communion Service

Matthew 20:20-28

So Tom and I are watching the West Wing, not not for the first time, but it's a sort of late lockdown kind of hangover because we've been watching lots of other things as well. And if any of you haven't seen it, then it's on Channel four catch-up at the minute so you can watch it for free. Just need several months with nothing else to do. But it's absolutely brilliant. And if you're one of those people who have never seen it, it's a drama about American politics and life in the White House. And we have just started series five. And in the episode that we watched, the president, who is President Bartlet, temporarily steps down from being the leader of the United States of America because his daughter has been kidnapped. And the man who steps up and becomes president in his absence is a man called President Warden. And the scene we saw, which while I was preparing the sermon, just struck me so profoundly, is President Walden sat in the White House on the phone to military families, telling them the news that their children have just been killed in the line of duty. It's one of his very first actions. And he looks up at the secretary and he says pointedly, "So when does the fun start? I thought, I'll be spending my time flying around in Air Force One." His words are meant to be ironic, but in that brief scene for me, there's a glimpse of the kind of emotions that are at play in our reading this morning. There's the desperation of being a parent when your child is in danger. Nothing about being the president makes those feelings any less consuming. There's the unseen agony of parents whose children were killed, here killed in the line of duty. We can imagine those parents with proudly displayed photos of their passing-out parades in their full glowing uniform, their full glory - now stained with tears. And then there are those words of a man who's just stepped into a position which is envied by the world and yet bearing and feeling the full weight of responsibility, "When does the fun bit start?" People often only see the parts of a high status job that look powerful and exciting, the media photos, the large salaries, the power to make things happen, the private jet. But of course, behind the scenes, there is always the pressure, the criticism, the impossible decisions, the relentless demands.

And so to our reading, firstly, we see the mother of James and John, like any other proud parent, she's keen to make sure her sons get on in life, that they get a step up and gain some power. You can imagine, with a bit of licence, her hoping to get a photograph of James and John sat with Jesus, either side, grinning delightedly when they've overthrown the authorities and they're forming their new White House kingdom of power: she has a sense that they are very close to that position; one that will change everybody's fortunes; their position in society; that they'll have high status jobs with high status rewards. She gets down on her knees before Jesus and begs him, "Can my son sit on your right and your left when when you're the ruler, please?"

What is missing from the reading that we heard this morning are the two verses that go before it, which actually set up the irony of her words. They are these: 'While Jesus was going to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves and said to them on the way,

"See, we're going up to Jerusalem and the son of man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and they will hand him over to the gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. And on the third day, he will be raised."

It's literally moments after Jesus has spelt out very clearly to his disciples what is going to happen, the utter loss of status, the mocking, the flogging, the crucifixion, that James's mother asks the question, clearly clueless as to what she's actually wishing for.

But Jesus then turns to James and John and says to them, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?" "We are", they reply perhaps too enthusiastically, clearly unable to think the unthinkable, to comprehend Jesus's words. But perhaps, like the family of the fallen military, unable really to imagine that event ahead of time. It's clear that everyone is expecting the fun part, the glory, the status, the power. No-one close to Jesus really understood what his radical Kingdom message meant. We see the other disciples angry and jealous at the exchange, leading Jesus to the heart of his message this morning, "Whoever wishes to be great amongst you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first amongst you must be your slave. Just as the son of man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many." This is the heart of the gospel, a complete subversion of the usual order of

things, a reversal of power-structures where the poor, the outcasts and the forgotten of society are honoured as if they were the greatest; a vision of a world where all those with great status and power use it to serve the most vulnerable and in need.

I wrote the sermon before I read Jonathan's blog, and actually he's reflected on the same themes, because I was particularly struck this week - I don't know if you saw it by the Times biggest donor list. It's a list of the wealthiest people, the percentage of their current wealth they have given to charitable causes. And this year, the list is topped by Marcus Rashford, who has given away 120 percent of his income. He's doing it to seek to eradicate child hunger. He's donated more than he has been given. He's donated because he knows what it is to move from being last to first. A powerful image of what it means to use what you have for the sake of the kingdom.

James and John and Peter did indeed continue to journey closest to Jesus. They had experienced the glory going up to the mountain and seeing Jesus in his transfiguration, and they did indeed follow him to the cross and beyond. And they ultimately gave up everything they had and more.

And today, this Eighth Sunday of Trinity, is one where we particularly remember one of the brothers, James. James, was one of the first disciples to literally lose his life for his faith, post resurrection. He demonstrated that following Jesus doesn't mean understanding everything along the way, it doesn't mean getting everything right all the time. But it absolutely means being willing to drink the cup that Jesus drank when the time comes, it means accepting the responsibility, even when the fun bits are few and far between.

So as we come to the table this morning, sharing the cup symbolically, and the bread. We, like James, are invited by Jesus to walk as he walked, not for status or reward but because we're captivated by his presence. I found it fitting to learn that St. James is the patron saint of pilgrims and labourers as well as Spain. There are many times that we may experience great glory and joy, sensing without doubt that heaven is close by and we are surrounded by those who wish to serve and transform our world to be a better and fairer place. But we may also share the agony of loss, the weight of responsibility, the drudgery of service and the pain of suffering.

We are in a unique moment in time, where some are very much enjoying the freedoms beyond the past 18 months of restrictions, but where others are still very

much in the throes of grief and vulnerability, of fear and long term sickness and pain, including many who are known and dearly loved to us here.

Perhaps the way forward is to return to the message of St. James, which I believe is beautifully summed up in the words of our first hymn:

We are pilgrims on a journey,

Fellow travellers on the road.

We are here to help each other.

Walk for mile and bear the load.

I will weep when you are weeping;

when you laugh, I laugh with you;

I will share your joy and sorrow,

till we've seen this journey through.

Brother, sister, let me serve you;

let me be as Christ to you;

pray that I may have the grace

to let you be my servant to.

Reading Texts

Matthew [20:20-28](#)

²⁰ Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. ²¹ And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." ²² But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." ²³ He said to them, "You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." ²⁴ When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. ²⁵ But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ²⁶ It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; ²⁸ just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."