

What is the Kingdom of Heaven really like?

A reflection given on the on the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity, 17th October 2021, by the Curate, the Revd Dr Tim Kelly, in the Attended Communion Service.

Mark 10:35-45

I'm sure like many of you, I was shocked and appalled at the death of the David Amess MP who died after being stabbed at his constituency surgery in Essex just two days ago. This was a tragedy that, of course, should befall no one. But as the heartfelt tributes to his care and kindness have continued to be paid on television, radio and print news, it seems to add to the feeling of senselessness and injustice. I've been struck by a number of the comments that have been made about Sir David. The first is that his was a life of service. He had served as an MP for 38 years and in that time had worked with dedication and significant effort for his constituents. People have remarked how he was always willing to listen and to champion a cause, if he thought it was for the betterment of the area that he served. He delighted in others' success. Secondly, it's been said that he had a genuine interest in people. He loved to meet people face to face, to connect directly with the people that he served. Of course, it was meeting constituents in his MP surgery, such as the one that he held on Friday, that means that he was open to attack like other MPs. Thirdly, despite a long career in politics, as I listened on the radio yesterday, I heard it said of him that he held no desire for higher political office; he didn't want a ministerial role or a role in the cabinet: for him to serve as a local MP was his highest ambition and his highest reward.

So with these tributes to Sir David ringing in my ears, I came to today's gospel passage and we have James and John, the brothers nicknamed by Jesus the 'Sons of Thunder' clumsily asking Jesus to do for them whatever they ask. They've been following Jesus as part of his band of disciples for some time now and in their eyes, it's time to cash in some of that earned credit. 'We have been dutifully following you, Jesus.' Now they ask, 'What could you do for us?' Those two words, that little phrase having such great significance in this conversation. 'What could you do for us.' Then they go on to say exactly what they want Jesus to do for them: to grant them positions of authority and honour; to sit at Jesus's right hand and left. It shows their hand, shows their inner thinking clearly. What do they want in return for being Jesus followers? Status; to be elevated above the others; to be marked out as special. In short, they want a share of the glory of Jesus. Their thinking is

clear. They want a reward in heaven and ideally one that places them above their fellow disciples for the things that they've done on Earth.

Now I ask you, is that really what the Kingdom of Heaven is like? Is that the path that we all follow? Are we each presented with the Christian equivalent of a Tesco Club Card or Frequent Flyer Card that earns us points for the good deeds that we've done and the more points we collect, the higher our status and reward. Is it really that transactional? Is that what following Jesus is all about?

Some talk of this thinking as it being all about 'pie in the sky when you die'. Jesus, of course, brings their lofty ambitions crashing down by his response, "You have no idea what you're asking" he says, "And you have no idea what it means to be glorified?" Jesus asks them are they able to drink the cup that he drinks and be baptised with the baptism that he has received? If they want to be glorified as Jesus is glorified, he challenges them as to whether they can truly follow his path. James and John, true to their rather clumsy form, immediately responded, "Yes, we can." But do they really know what that means for them? And do we know what that means for each of us? Do we understand the implication of Jesus's path to glory? Jesus tells them that the glory does not come through seeking to 'lord it' over others, to seek that higher seat, but being willing instead to take the lower seat, to serve. Just as it says at the end of today's gospel reading, and in the words of the hymn that we've just sung, the Servant King, Jesus came into our world not to be served but to serve.

Paul in Philippians Chapter 2 verse 6 spells it out clearly, "Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. Being born in human likeness and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted Him and gave him the name that is above every name.

Jesus's glory and honour came not through something to be claimed and grasped, just as James and John were trying to grasp. To drink his cup and to share in his baptism, to share in his death as we do each time we celebrate Holy Communion, is a call to do the same, to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility to regard others as better than ourselves - for each of us not to look to our own interests, but instead to look for the interests of others.

When we let that sink in for a moment, we can perhaps start to see why Jesus challenges James and John as to whether they really know what it is they are asking. And doesn't this also challenge us and our view of the Kingdom of God today? In our participation of the Kingdom of God, is it all about glory, reward, and life postponed to some future heavenly day? Or is it instead a Kingdom where we are each called to be part-responsible for ushering that Kingdom in, to begin to make it real in practical and actionable ways, here and now.

Paraphrasing those famous words from John F Kennedy when he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." Jesus's words in today's gospel reading might lead us to say this, "Ask not what Jesus can do for you. Ask instead, what you can do to serve others and to walk alongside others."

Bringing it back to Friday's tragic events, it seems from the tributes, that in many ways that is what Sir David Amess chose to do with his life, an inspiring life dedicated to others, not guided or motivated by vain ambition or self interest, but a life of service that resulted in an unfair, unexpected and untimely sacrifice.

Confident of Jesus's victory and claiming his promise,
'May he rest in peace and rise in glory. Amen.'

Reading Text

Mark 10:35-45

³⁵ James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' ³⁶ And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' ³⁷ And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' ³⁸ But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' ³⁹ They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.' ⁴¹ When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴² So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'