



Matthew 20:20–21

20 Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. 21 “What is it you want?” he asked. She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.”

Reflection

All this talk of kingdom and the king is finally marching on Jerusalem. It's about time and it's good timing in fact. It's good timing because a huge potential army of zealous Jews is amassing in Jerusalem right now. Which means it's a very nervous time for their Roman oppressors. They're nervous not only because of the huge numbers of Jewish religious pilgrims that are descending on Jerusalem but also about what they're coming to celebrate. They're coming to celebrate the Passover, the sacred period in Israel's history when God rescued them out of slavery in Egypt. 1500 years later it's not Egyptians who are oppressing God's people, it's Romans, only during Passover, amidst all the religious fervour, these Romans tended to look a lot like Egyptians. All this makes Jerusalem a tinderbox. Even the hint of a

spark and civil war could break out at any moment. Just a word from Jesus and the revolution would begin.

And what two better men to fight right alongside him than James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They're aggressive, Jesus even named them the 'sons of thunder' in Mark 3:17 which in Hebrew means the 'loud ones' or perhaps the 'hot tempered pair'. Here's an idea of their style from Luke 9:54. A Samaritan village was hostile towards Jesus, this is how they reacted:

54 When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"

Or in Mark 9:38,

38 “Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”

In today’s passage the ‘sons of thunder’ approach Jesus to claim positions of honour alongside him after his coming victory in Jerusalem. They’re not afraid of a fight but they’re not above a little strategy either, and so they approach Jesus with their mother as their spokesperson.

Along with his disciples a faithful group of women have been following Jesus since he left Galilee, ministering to his needs. It’s likely that they included Jesus’ mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, a third lady named

Mary, Joanna and the wife of Zebedee, the mother of James and John. We can't confirm it but it is likely that her name was Salome and that she was related to Jesus, his mother Mary's sister, which made her Jesus' aunt. With her two sons in tow, from verse 20,

the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

This is a bold request. It appears the apples haven't fallen far from the tree. On her knees, kneeling before Jesus, with her two sons standing right behind her, she asks a favour of him.

“Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the

other at your left in your kingdom.”

Culturally there's a couple of points we need to note here. Firstly, in a patriarchal society, a male-dominated culture, as was much of the ancient world, one of the main ways in which a woman could exercise power was in terms of her ongoing influence over her adult sons. So this request is for them, but it is also for herself. Secondly, in both the Jewish and Greco Roman culture of the time, women could get away with asking questions men dare not ask, especially older women, who were respected in a way that younger women were not. Thirdly, and I think universally, there is a special bond isn't there between a mother and her sons? So often there's nothing a mum wouldn't do for her boys.

With all of this in play James and John's mum asks Jesus for the places of honour at his right and left hand when he comes into his kingdom. Typically the place at the king's right hand was reserved for the crown prince and the place at his left hand for his general.

This is a bold request. James and John were amongst the first four chosen to be Jesus disciples. They were amongst the three that Jesus took up the mountain with him to witness his transfiguration. Now they want to be the two. But this shouldn't surprise us should it? After all, isn't the concern for status, power and prestige what drives us all to one degree or another? And this conversation about greatness has been going on since the start of Matthew 18.

But what should surprise us is that immediately before this passage Jesus described in the most graphic nature yet his upcoming torture and death in Jerusalem. Here's the graphic detail,

... the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death ¹⁹ and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!”

He's going to be betrayed, wrongly tried and convicted, sentenced to death, mocked, flogged, publically shamed and then crucified – dying one of the most

torturous death ever invented by human beings. And these two are daydreaming about dividing the victory spoils! It is extraordinary how long we can live life according to an imaginary script. A reality that we've created for ourselves because we don't like what's unfolding around us. James and John preferred their version of events. They preferred their plans for Jesus, their plans for their own life, so much so that they've somehow managed to edit what he's said, and filter out the parts they don't like, so that they can continue their fantasy of conquering Jerusalem and having positions of power and status for themselves.

One day soon, as it will be for us all, their fiction will meet reality. Jesus will be pronounced 'the king of the Jews,' not by

adoring crowds, but by the plaque above his head as he bleeds out on the cross. His crown will be a crown of thorns, his purple robe a mockery, he'll carry his throne on his back, sit down on it to die, and at his right and his left will be two criminals who'll die alongside him.

“Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.”

Think & Pray

Take some time for yourself now to consider James and John and their mother's request. Are you like them, human like them, with status never far from your mind? How important to you is the image that you project? The suburb you live in? The

school that your children attend? How do you feel about the car you drive, the car you'd like to drive and the cars you see other people driving? How concerned are you with status? Has it made you delusional like it did these two men? So much so that you prefer your plan for you, over Jesus's plan for you? So much so that you've kind of compartmentalised God? Put him in a box called 'balance' in your life. 'I'll go along with the Christian thing, especially on Sundays but when it comes to my plans for me, my house, my career, my money, my lifestyle, the status I enjoy, well all that's off limits. I'll just edit out the parts in the bible that I'd prefer not see. Is your Jesus the Jesus of Matthew's gospel, the one who says 'Take up your cross and follow me?' Or a cardboard cut-out Jesus that you've fashioned after your own im-

age, so that his plan for life just happens to be perfectly consistent with your own?

These are searching questions. And I don't know about you but as I try to answer them I realise that I'm as guilty of this as James and John. I need to repent. If you do too then please close our time as I intend to in repentance and prayer.