



Matthew 20:22–23

22 “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink? “We can,” they answered. 23 Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.”

Reflection

James and John's mother is on her knees in front of Jesus. They're standing not too far behind. The three are in league but they've most likely put her up to this. She's a brave woman and bold like her sons. Jesus named them 'sons of thunder' because of their bold, aggressive natures. They've sensed an opportunity and have moved to take it. They want to be number one and two. In the world they've constructed Jesus will soon enter Jerusalem as a triumphant king, the rightful king come to drive out the Roman occupiers and reclaim David's throne in Jerusalem. They want to rule at his right and left hand, number two and number three in charge. They're prepared to fight, but they're not above a little strategy and so they've sent

their mother to be their spokesperson.

This would have been compelling culturally, as older women were accorded a certain respect, and could therefore ask things than men couldn't get away with. But it's also likely that their mother was Mary, the mother of Jesus' sister, making her Jesus' aunt and in fact James and John Jesus' cousins. This isn't confirmed in Scripture but it is likely. All this adds up to quite a bold strategy and a compelling case. On her knees, she asks Jesus:

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

It may be their Mum who asks the question but when Jesus answers, he goes di-

rectly to the source. From verse 22,

22 “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” “We can,” they answered.

Jesus speaks directly to James and John and says to them, ‘You don’t know what you are asking.’ Which is pretty obvious to us as readers of Matthew’s gospel but somehow not to them. In his third Passion prediction, his most graphic yet, Jesus has just told them that 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 they’re asking to be a part of this? To take their

place at his right and left hand? There will be two men at his left and right, men with nails driven into the nerve centres of their wrists and into their ankles, who'll suffer this torture for hours if not days until they finally suffocate, or drown in their own blood.

“You don't know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them.

And then he adds,

“Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?”

And here's where it pays to know your Old Testament. Jesus is using a metaphor that is common in the Old Testament. Sometimes it's a metaphor for blessing but far

more often it means judgement. Like in Psalm 75,

8 In the hand of the Lord is a cup
full of foaming wine mixed with spices;

he pours it out, and all the wicked of
the earth

drink it down to its very dregs.

Or in Isaiah 51

Or Isaiah 51:17,

17 Awake, awake!

Rise up, Jerusalem,
you who have drunk from the hand of
the Lord

the cup of his wrath,
you who have drained to its dregs
the goblet that makes people stag-

ger.

And these two are daydreaming about dividing the victory spoils! It is extraordinary how long we can continue living life 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, filter out what they don't like, so that they can continue their fantasy of conquering Jerusalem and having positions of power and status for themselves.

“Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?”

Jesus says to them. The cup filled to full measure with the wrath of God that I am about to drain to its very dregs?

“We can,” they answered.

And they would. Although it doesn't turn out quite like they expect. James becomes one of the first Christian martyrs. He's put to death by the sword in Acts 12 by King Herod. John is exiled, imprisoned, some early church traditions say that he was boiled alive only to miraculously live on. While we can't know with 100% certainty it's likely that most of Jesus' disciples will follow a similar fate of persecution and martyrdom.

Jesus confirms the truth of their answer,

23 Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.”

There will be positions of glory at Jesus’ right and left in the kingdom of heaven but those positions will be appointed not by Jesus but by his heavenly Father. But what seems clear from our passage is that those positions of honour will be earned in a similar fashion to the way Jesus earns his. A self-less life of sacrifice, suffering and and most probably death in service of the kingdom of heaven and the glory of God. So the last will be first and the first will be last. Or as Jesus puts it in our passage tomorrow.

Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Think

Do you think much about greatness? If not, you should. Jesus calls us to follow in his footsteps and be great. But not great in terms of the way our culture defines greatness. The greatest amongst us are those who in humility see themselves as the least. And in dependency on God and in obedience to him they become the servants of all. And they do this out of love,

love of God and love for each other. How can you be great today? What opportunities do you see in the day that lies ahead to act counter-culturally, selflessly? Ways that you can lay down your life today in service of the people that God has placed in your lives so that you can advance his kingdom here on earth? To serve isn't to step down it's to rise above. How can you step down to greatness today? How can you step down today to lead those around you to Christ?

Pray

Spend some time praying to close. Pray against a proud, self-centred heart. Pray against the allure of status and the good opinion of our peers that makes us more children of our culture than children of

our God. Pray for a servant heart. And pray for opportunities to serve others and the courage and discipline to take them. Here's the supreme example of what this looks like, in the Garden of Gethsemene, about 18 hours before the cross:

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." (Matt 26:39)