

## THERFIELD CHAPEL

Sunday 23 November 2003 6:30pm

### MARK 10 v 32 - 52

*Mark 10:32-52*

*They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. [33] "We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, [34] who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."*

*[35] Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."*

*[36] "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.*

*[37] They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."*

*[38] "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?"*

*[39] "We can," they answered.*

*Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with, [40] 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."*

*[41] When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John.*

*[42] Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. [43] Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, [44] and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. [45] For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

*[46] Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging. [47] When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"*

*[48] Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"*

*[49] Jesus stopped and said, "Call him."*

*So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." [50] Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.*

*[51] "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him.*

*The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see."*

*[52] "Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.*

[Synoptic passages at Matt 20 vv 17-34 Luke 18 vv 31-43]

## SERMON

We now enter what we might consider to be the start of the final leg of Jesus' earthly ministry - the journey towards Jerusalem. The disciples had been told at least twice before what was waiting for Jesus in Jerusalem: betrayal, persecution, torture and finally death. Perhaps they subconsciously thought that, as long as Jesus stayed away from Jerusalem, these things wouldn't happen. They'd spent the last year or so mostly pottering around in the Jordan valley. There had been the excitement of the Transfiguration, the joy at watching the sick healed, the astonishment of seeing demons cast out, the joy of seeing the hungry fed, the fun of seeing Jesus with the children and the amusement at watching Jesus send the Pharisees and Sadducees away with fleas in their ears. Jesus was only in his early thirties - so surely all this stuff about him going to Jerusalem and meeting his death was years away yet.

So Jesus leads them away from Jericho and the Jordan and the disciples follow as was their habit. "So where are we going?" is the question that one of them must have asked.

"Jerusalem" replies Jesus. Stunned silence! Mark tells us that the disciples were astonished and the rest of the crowd that followed him were afraid. To hark back to where we were a few weeks ago - this was like Robin Hood deciding to walk straight up to the gates of Nottingham Castle, right into the hands of the Prince John and the Sheriff of Nottingham.

There was no discussion. There was no "where shall we go now?" Jesus was in front, walking ahead of them on the road to Jerusalem. "That's where I'm going" he says, "follow if you want."

The for a third time Jesus takes the disciples aside and spells out in the greatest detail yet exactly was lay ahead for him.

*"We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, [34] who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.*

This was not a pessimistic moan about how he might be treated when he arrived in Jerusalem. This was a clear, detailed and certain prediction of exactly what was going to happen. This was not the time for saying things like "Oh there there, I'm sure it's not going to be as bad as you think. You'll see - everything will be alright." The disciples, it seemed, had fully appreciated that, at last. They had no doubt that this was the beginning of the end.

But then the most extraordinary thing happens. Just like relatives squabbling over the possessions of a recently deceased person, the disciples start jostling for position.

*[35] Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." [36] "What do you want me to do for*

*you?" he asked. [37] They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."*

It seems that Jesus' promises of an eternal kingdom had been accepted all too readily. With the knowledge that Jesus could now be only a few days away from death, James and John decided that they shouldn't waste any time in confronting Jesus with something that I'm sure they'd been cooking up between themselves for quite some time. James and John were brothers and were both called into discipleship at the same time. Jesus nick-named them Boanerges - Sons of Thunder. It's likely that they were also the cousins of Jesus. They were also present, with Peter, at the Transfiguration. Perhaps all those reasons combined to make them feel that they were somehow worthy of more special treatment and honour than the other disciples. Perhaps they were spurred on by their mother who, Matthew tells us, came with them to talk to Jesus. Perhaps they were jealous of Peter who always seemed to be Jesus' closest confidante. Now was the time to remind Jesus that blood was thicker than water!

*"Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."*

We could be generous to James and John and assume that what they were really saying was that, whatever happened to Jesus after his death, they wanted to be as close to him as possible. Don't we all feel like that? But no, there is no escaping the fact that they were after honour and privilege. In Jewish tradition, to be seated at someone's right hand was to be given a place of honour and glory, and to be seated at the left was the second-highest position of honour. No doubt, had Jesus simply agreed to their request, there would have been fighting between James and John as to who would be on the right and who would be on the left!

There is no escaping the fact that they wanted to be superior to the other ten disciples. If Jesus was going to be Prime Minister in this new and eternal Cabinet, then James and John wanted to be Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer!

Although they had obviously accepted that an eternal kingdom of glory was to follow Jesus' death, both James and John had got a rather twisted picture of it. Perhaps they could see themselves occupying Herod's Palace, with Jesus on the throne, and themselves seated around him as he dished out orders about what was to be done with the defeated Romans. And here would be their chance to take some delegated responsibility and be able to give that gobby Peter some orders, for a change!

And what was Jesus' reply? [38] *"You don't know what you are asking,"*

Literally, they didn't know what they were asking - the question was based on total ignorance of what the coming kingdom was to be like. Also it was based on a lot of ignorance about what being a disciple actually meant - despite a lot of earlier teaching by Jesus.

Before we move on to see exactly how Jesus dealt with this issue, I'd like to put out text to one side for a moment and spend just a little while looking at whether or not Jesus showed favouritism amongst his disciples. And the answer seems to be yes.

Back in chapter 9 we saw that it was Peter, James and John that Jesus took with him up the mountain of Transfiguration ... why not the other nine?

Moving ahead in time a little - to the Garden of Gethsemane after the Last Supper, we read that all the disciples (except Judas) went out with Jesus after the meal, but again it was Peter James and John whom he selected to go with him as he prayed those final prayers before his betrayal and arrest - why not all 12?

I'm not sure that favouritism is quite the right word, but it does seem clear that some of the disciples were singled out for greater honour and responsibility than the others. So if Jesus showed some kind of favouritism during his earthly ministry - can we expect that there is some kind of hierarchy of honour in the eternal kingdom? When we get to heaven, are we all treated the same, or will there be some present with higher honour than others?

Looking even further on to the vision of heaven that John had in the book of Revelation, we read of a whole hierarchy of people around Christ's throne - there are the 24 elders, the four living creatures, the cherubim, the seraphim, the prophets, the angels, the martyrs, the 144,000 special Jews from the 12 tribes and then comes the vast multitude of the saved.

So it does seem there is some kind of heavenly pecking-order where some people have higher places of honour than others. I don't object to this - I don't know about you? But to me it seems that the likes of Billy Graham, Mother Theresa, Wesley, Spurgeon, St Paul, CS Lewis (who incidentally died 40 years ago yesterday) and all the other great Christians who have contributed so much to the spread of the Gospel, DO deserve some kind of higher honour than the likes of you and me ... well, the likes of me anyway!

Is there any basis for this assumption? I think there is. Firstly, in his reply to James and John, Jesus says:

*[40] 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."*

So if we learn anything, we learn that there are places of honour to be had, even if we don't know who gets them.

Further to that, there's a nagging verse that always comes to my mind when I sit down to prepare a sermon - and it should nag at the mind of anyone who dares to spout from a pulpit. That verse is James 3:1

*Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.*

Judged??? Judged??? Surely judgement is for the non-believer? We are the redeemed, the forgiven. We are the ones who have already passed from death to life through the love that Jesus showed us by dying for us on that cross .. so what's all this about judgement?

*2 Cor. 5:10*

*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

*Romans 14:10*

*You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.*

*Romans 14:12*

*So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.*

Now, is anyone still in doubt that Christians too will go through a judgement? Let's be VERY clear about this. This judgement - usually referred to as The Judgement Seat of Christ - is not the same as the judgement to be faced by unbelievers and those who reject Christ ... that one is usually referred to as the Great White Throne Judgement which we read about in the book of Revelation:

*Rev. 20:11-15*

*Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. [12] And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. [13] The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. [14] Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. [15] If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*

That, I repeat, is NOT the judgement that we as Christians face. We have already made our choice to trust in Jesus and accept his forgiveness for our sins. We already have the "not guilty" verdict passed on us and our place in Christ's eternal kingdom is assured ... this is the gospel of Christ.

But this other judgement, the Judgement Seat of Christ is one which we will go through. It is not a judgement of sins - they have been forgiven - it is a judgement of works. Paul gives us a little more detail:

*1 Cor. 4:5*

*Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.*

Each will receive his praise from God ... this is where we get our merit points, or otherwise. This judgement is about how good we have been at stewardship of our God-given talents

*1 Cor. 3:10-15*

*By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. [11] For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.*

[12] *If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, [13] his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. [14] If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. [15] If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; **he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.***

OK - enough about judgement - I think we get the idea. But if there is some kind of judgement that we must all go through, then there must also be some kind of outcome of that judgement .... there is no point in a judgement that does not have a result! Some will come out better from that judgement than others. And if we are to receive rewards for what we have done by way of Christian stewardship ... then it seems likely that some will be rewarded more than others .. remember the Parable of the Talents! So what might those rewards be? Money will be pretty irrelevant in the eternal kingdom, so I think it's fair to assume that greater or lesser amounts of honour will be bestowed on us, according to what we have done and how we have lived our Christian lives.

Food for thought!

Now, we can return to tonight's passage. James and John seem to have cottoned on to the idea that there will be various places of honour in the eternal kingdom, and they wanted to ensure that they got the places of highest honour - seated either side of Jesus himself. And they thought that these honours were there just to be asked for rather than earned.

So what does Jesus say? Mark 10:38:

*"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?"*

Jesus told them they did **not** realise what was involved in their ambitious request. In reality, to ask for a place of honour in his glory is also a request to share his suffering. **The cup** was a common Jewish metaphor either for joy or for divine judgment against human sin. Jesus applied this metaphor to himself because he was to bear the wrath of God's judgement against sin, in place of the sinners. He would drink the "cup" voluntarily. The picture of **baptism** expresses a parallel thought. Being under water was an Old Testament picture of being overwhelmed by calamity. Here the "calamity" that Jesus was to face was bearing the burden of God's judgement on sin, which would involve overwhelming sufferings culminating in His death.

James and John may have thought Jesus was describing some messianic battle so they replied confidently to Jesus' question: **We can share with you in all this.** At least it showed their willingness to fight in such a battle. But their reply also showed that they had not understood Jesus' words. So Jesus applied the same cup and baptism metaphors to them, but in a different sense. In following him they would share his sufferings, even to death, but not a death that could bring about redemption for men. Jesus' prediction was fulfilled: James was the first apostle to be martyred, whereas John, who endured many years of persecution and exile, was the last of the apostles to die.

So, in effect, Jesus denied their request:

*Mark 10:40*

*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."*

Just who Jesus was referring to, we don't know - and we won't know until we get there and see for ourselves.

*When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. [v42]*

Well surprise surprise! If this was a school - they would have been called sneaks and creeps, sucking up to teacher. But the fact that the 10 were indignant rather than just disappointed or embarrassed might suggest that the other 10 disciples were also harbouring some hopes and thoughts of future greatness. So Jesus uses the opportunity to clarify things and point out that there is no room for bosses in the kingdom of God. James and John might have been after their own office with a nice leather-covered desk and a private secretary, but Jesus has to spell out that leadership and honour in Christ's kingdom doesn't work like that. If you want to be great in the eternal kingdom, he tells them, first you have to roll your shirt-sleeves up, get your hands dirty and serve your fellow man.

In the words of the commentator Matthew Henry: *Worldly honour is a glittering thing, with which the eyes of Christ's own disciples have many a time been dazzled. To be good should be more our care than to look great, or to have the pre-eminence.*

Jesus himself is the supreme example of true greatness. The Son of Man voluntarily cast aside his glory and greatness and became a man and a servant of God, not to be served by others, but to serve them - a service that would cost him his dignity and his life to become a ransom for many. He did this voluntarily, sacrificially and obediently.

So there are rewards to be had in God's eternal kingdom, and there are varying positions of honour to be given to those who give a good account of their works before the Judgement Seat of Christ. That's why it's important to use our talents and our time and energy to glorify God.

No that the hope of reward should be what drives us. Love for God and obedience to his call should be what drives us. Obedience is its own reward in many ways.

*[Jas 3:1] Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.*

So what am I to do - and what is anyone who presumes to stand in a pulpit and teach to do? If we're to be judged more strictly, surely it would be better to avoid teaching altogether so that we're not judged so strictly! No, that's not an option. For me, at any rate, I'd rather be judged more strictly for doing something than be judged for doing nothing!

As for rewards and a place of honour ... it would be nice but I can't afford to think about that. To be allowed into God's eternal kingdom is enough.

Last night I was in Ely Cathedral for a concert including Berlioz's *Te Deum* .. a fantastic piece of choral music in praise of God. It featured a huge orchestra, the massive cathedral organ and no less than five choirs! It would have been great to have had a front row seat! As it was, I was two-thirds of the way back, stuck behind a man with a very large head! But I'd have rather been there than not got in at all. And I think my attitude to a place in heaven is pretty much the same. So when we all meet up again in heaven .... I'll be the one at the back behind the pillar! Please come and say hello!

But we should strive to do good works. We should encourage and spur each other on to use our talents. We should be bold and take risks for God. We should look for and take opportunities to serve him and each other. Not because we are to be judged, but because that's what our Lord calls us to do for his name's sake.

The healing of blind Bartimaeus was a direct example of what Jesus told James and John about being a servant, not a boss. We can only speculate about how James and John might have handled the episode with Bartimaeus if they had been left to their own devices. Verse 48 tells us that many of the crowd told Bartimaeus to be quiet and not to pester Jesus. I wonder if James and John - the Sons of Thunder - were among those? Jesus was too important to be bothered with a blind beggar and so probably were James and John, in their own estimation. If they had been granted their request to have positions of high authority, I can just imagine them sitting behind their leather-topped desks, playing with the paper clips and waving at their secretaries to go and do something about that blind nuisance over there.

But that wasn't Jesus' way at all. Despite the fact he was now headed towards Jerusalem and a certain death, despite the fact that the salvation of the whole of mankind was on his shoulders, he went over to Bartimaeus and said "What would you like me to do for you?" And that's what Christian service is about.

I remember listening to the TV personality Clive James being interviewed about his memories of Joyce Grenfell - that wonderful comedienne of "*George, don't do that*" fame. Clive James had just come to London from Australia and Joyce Grenfell had taken him under her wing. One day she suggested they went for a walk in one of London's parks. As they were walking they came upon a very dirty beggar sitting on a bench. "Look at that" says Clive James, who was then a young idealistic communist, "when we get the politics of this place sorted out, there will be no more of this kind of poverty. There needs to be a revolution, more people should join the Communist Party." After he had ranted on a bit, Joyce Grenfell went up to the bench and handed the tramp a packet of sandwiches. "Here you are Sam" she said, "It's corned beef this time. Tell me how your wife is today."

Says it all, doesn't it? And Joyce Grenfell wasn't even a Christian as we would understand it ... she was a member of the Christian Science movement. Are you and I going to be outdone by her???

One last thought I'd like to leave you with from tonight's passage. Have a look at verse 36: "*What do you want me to do for you?*" Jesus asked James and John. Then look at verse 51: "*What do you want me to do for you?*" Jesus asked Bartimaeus.

James and John wanted positions of power and authority; Bartimaeus just wanted to see. One of those requests was granted; the other wasn't.

Let's just bow our heads and close our eyes as we ponder that one. Jesus is here with us now. And to each one of us he's saying: "*What do you want me to do for you?*"

What are you going to choose?

What do you want Jesus to do for you as an individual?

What do you want Jesus to do for you as a family?

What do you want Jesus to do for you as a fellowship?

Lord Jesus Christ, you gave up everything for our sakes. You spared nothing and gave up your life in order that we might enter into your eternal Kingdom. And yet you did this not because you sought glory but because you love each one of us utterly. Grant us the grace to follow you in helping others to find your love. Make us bold servants, attempting great things and using our talents in the service of others. We seek no reward other than knowing that we do your will. In your name we offer this prayer. Amen.