

Year B

Mark 10:35-45

It's interesting to take a look at a number of Renaissance paintings of Jesus' crucifixion scene. Many will have the solitary cross of Christ with the key figures, his mother and some disciples, gathered by the base of the cross. Other paintings will depict the three crosses with the criminals either side of Jesus. Some painters have given a greater weight of prominence to the three cross scene than others. In the verses just before the Gospel text this morning Jesus had told

the disciples that he would be condemned, humiliated and killed. Then almost immediately, James and John put their request to Jesus that they be allowed to occupy places to his right and left in his glory, not realising that those places would not be seats, but crosses either side! They then dug even deeper holes for themselves as they committed themselves to be baptised with his baptism and to drink from his cup. Fools!! Or were they? Are we, as we too are baptised with his baptism and drink also from his cup every time we gather around his table?

A teacher was once handed the following note by one of her pupils: "Dear Teacher, Please excuse Harriet for missing school yesterday. We forgot to get the Sunday paper off the porch, and when we found it on Monday, we thought it was Sunday." How's that for confusion. Welcome to the world of James and John, the sons of Zebedee. Welcome to our world!

It is very important that we don't let ourselves off the hook. What does a child say when he or she is wanting something? "Dad, will you say yes if I ask you something?" Well, there's no chance of that

is there? That's exactly how James and John approached Jesus. Will you say yes if we ask you something. Very childish - very real because that's how we operate too. In verse 32, just a few verses before our text today we read that "those who followed Jesus were afraid". What does fear do to people if it doesn't lead them to try and negotiate a place of safety and security. James and John are the patron saints of such negotiators and we're all members of their club. James and John were not being especially forward, pushy or arrogant, as the other disciples might have believed. They

were simply acting in the interests of self-preservation. All of us are conflicted beings. We may have ideals by which we seek to live to honour but in the process of attempting to honour the ideals we find that we're looking after ourselves in the process. Every task that can be done for the advancement of Christ's work on earth can also be done for the security of the person who is involved in the task. There are occasions when that sort of dual motivation is exposed and we're forced to look at it and what we do with the knowledge will determine whether we grow or not. The other disciples were furious with

James and John. Jesus wasn't. He can see through us and he knows how we work. Henri Nouwen, the Dutch theologian, wrote; "Only those who face their wounded condition can be available for healing and so enter a new way of living." James and John had not been removed from their role as disciples and future apostles of the Church by their grasp for power. No, they were simply reminded of their wounded condition and provided they didn't ignore that fact and its repercussions they would remain followers of Christ. It's exactly the same with us. We have to face our wounded condition

and understand the conflicted nature of our motivations.

This powerful little passage provides us with our medicine as well. We are fortunate that all the Gospel texts are the product of the first century Christian Church. They are all post-Jesus texts. Jesus was long dead before any of the Gospels were written. In the stories of Jesus and often in his words as reported by the apostles of the Church we are offered a remedy and here, in the text today, it is no different. It always amazes me that some Christians are almost allergic to sacramental readings of Gospel texts even

when the text is almost screaming out the context to them! Here, for me, the sacramental imagery is blatant. Talk of baptisms and drinking cups leads only one way in the liturgical discipline of the Church. It leads us to the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, the initiation rite of the Church, and to the Sacrament of Holy Communion, the nourishment for life in Christ in the Church. Both baptism and the Lord's Supper combine to illumine the way of the cross which will lead Jesus to give his life as a ransom for many. Remember the disciples were afraid. This lead them to seek security

in positions of authority and their efforts were exposed and their insecurities laid bare. What are we to do with disciples like that? Well, we are to lead them on from their baptism into the regular receiving of the cup of Christ's blood that their insecurities and fears are continually laid before the way of the cross. This is the pattern of healthy living that is established through this ancient tale of Jesus' early encounters with his disciples and James and John were not ashamed for their names to be exposed for all time, for as significant a teaching as that.

History has preserved for us two magnificent silver cups from the peat bogs of Ireland. The first is known as the Gundestrup Cauldron and comes from a century or two before Christ, at the time when the Irish worshipped violent pagan gods. It is adorned with pictures of gods and warriors. One panel shows a gigantic cook-god holding squirming humans and dropping them into a vat of oil. These gods demanded human sacrifice to appease their appetite.

The second cup is called the Ardagh Chalice and comes from the seventh or eighth centuries after Christ, a time when the Irish

had turned to Christianity. Like the first it is a work of magnificent craftsmanship, but the God it depicts is radically different. It has a simple but intricate patterning. But this is a cup of peace, designed to be used in communion. As the worshiper lifts it to his or her lips he or she is reminded that this God sacrifices himself for us.¹

The way of the cross makes sense through living with the sacraments and in that our insecurities and fears are faced and dealt with. Thanks be to God for his precious gift.

Amen.

¹ Cahill, T. 1995 How the Irish Saved Civilisation London: Hodder & Stoughton