

Trinity 21 [Proper 24 (B)]

A sermon preached at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on 21 October 2018 by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker

Readings: Hebrews 5 verses 1-10 and Mark 10 verses 35-45

The last verse of today's Gospel is the most important in Mark's gospel. This assertion remains imprinted on my mind from university lectures, some forty years ago, by Professor Morna Hooker, who stressed time after time that verse 45 is the key to the whole of Mark's gospel.

Curiously, we have jumped to this morning's passage from last week's reading omitting the three verses in which Jesus refers to his forthcoming death in Jerusalem. We read today's Gospel in the light of our knowledge of the reality of Jesus' death on the cross - in the cross we find the heart of our Christian faith and at the same time the paradox, that an instrument of torture and death, usually the way a common criminal was judicially killed, becomes, in God's wonderful providence, the means of life and salvation for those who respond to God's gracious invitation to faith.

St Paul speaks about the cross as a scandal and a stumbling block as he preaches the Christian faith to the Corinthians. That this is how people who were not Christians saw Jesus' crucifixion and the Church's witness to the living Lord Jesus is demonstrated by an unknown pagan artist in the Roman Empire, who drew a picture of a man hanging on a cross, with the head of a donkey. How could the victim of such a humiliating death ever be called victorious? How could this tortured wreck of a man have power to save?

These questions take us into the heart of the Christian faith, with the last words of today's gospel reading reminding us of how Jesus saw his own mission. In these words and in Jesus' whole attitude, we are reminded of how different the Christian faith is to normal human ideas.

'Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem as he speaks these powerful and significant words. The sphere of his ministry is moving from the towns and villages of Galilee, where he is at home, to Jerusalem, the focus of opposition to him. No wonder the disciples are filled with alarm, as Mark tells us in those missing verses immediately before today's reading. No wonder that those outside this immediate circle, who were attracted to Christ and felt the pull of his magnetic personality, were afraid. Why?

First, no doubt, they were afraid of trouble with the authorities; they regarded the Temple priests and doctors of the law with respect and reverence and even fear. It was obvious that some kind of clash between the establishment and Jesus was bound to come.

Second, there must have been (as in all political events in Palestine) a fear of the occupying Roman power. It was only comparatively recently that a revolt, an uprising of Zealots, had resulted in heavy handed action by the Roman authorities. The revolt was crushed and many were killed for being in the wrong

place at the wrong time. One of Jesus' disciples was Simon, known as the Zealot from his former association. He, at least, would have this unhappy event in mind.

Nevertheless, the disciples were not concentrating fully on Jesus' words and his state of mind. James and John, at least, were thinking about themselves. They made the mistake of looking to the glories of the future without considering the sorrows and trials that must come first, both for Jesus and his followers.

We might be tempted to snigger, like the other disciples, at the spiritual shallowness displayed by James and John (and then at the jealous reaction of the other ten). But human nature means that we breathe a huge sigh of relief when someone else is caught saying or doing what we might equally be accused of. It's the 'if the police have stopped the person in front for speeding, then they won't stop me' syndrome.

But Jesus addresses his words to everyone - to James and John, to the rest of the Twelve and to the others. Jesus makes it very clear that personal ambitions have no place in the Kingdom of God, either in heaven or as the Kingdom breaks into this world through the Body of Christ which is the Church. Glory may indeed come, but first it is the ransoming of his people that is demanded of Jesus and faithful service and self-sacrifice that is demanded of us, a seeking to serve others rather than ourselves. Jesus has come to serve, and so all who follow, whoever we are, must indeed be ready to put everything we are and everything we have at the service of the Kingdom. The images of the cup and baptism, being plunged into the depths of the water, both imply suffering. We can see that James and John agree too quickly, when Jesus gently draws them to think about what they are really saying in response to his challenge.

This calling would be impossible, were it not such a glorious calling - a calling to take our place as God's sons and daughters. Jesus wins our place in God's Kingdom through his willing acceptance of the cross. In the words of the hymn, 'Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.' In Jesus we see the Lord of Life and in him we see what our humanity is meant to be. Indeed the message of the cross is, as St Paul says, 'nonsense to those who are being lost; but to us who are being saved it is God's power'.

We wonder at the utterly amazing love of God and the lengths he was, and is, prepared to go for our sake. Following Jesus will involve hard choices for us. Even sacrifice. Humility and service are to mark our relationships with each other, in complete contrast to the way of the world. No wonder that the last verse of today's Gospel can be described as the key to Mark's gospel!