

*Faith's reward*

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem with his disciples, and he has been trying very hard to explain to them what awaits him there. And it's highly appropriate that if we had read on just a few verses in our gospel reading this morning we would have come to the next incident on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, the healing of a blind man, for it seems that that disciples are blind to what Jesus has been telling them. After all, he has been speaking about being handed over to the religious authorities and being condemned to death, and then handed over to the Romans and being mocked and spat upon and flogged – and what is these disciples' response? Well, listen to it again: 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' Sorry? I'm squaring up to the decisive events of my life when I will face utter rejection and an excruciating death – and you want me to do for you whatever you ask...' And Jesus, astoundingly, rather than turning on them, shows extraordinary forbearance: 'so what is it you want me to do for you?'

Well, here it gets even worse. And bear in mind here that we are dealing here with James and John and they are two of Jesus' closest disciples. They, along with Peter, are Jesus' most trusted, inner core group, and accordingly what they want from him is to sit at his right and left hand in his glory. We don't know exactly what James and John had in mind but it does seem as if they are conscious of their special status and keen to capitalise on it, and they imagine that Jesus is going to set up a government in Jerusalem and that they will be his key cabinet appointees, sitting on the right and left of his throne. And Jesus has to remind them that the only throne he is anticipating is a cross, and the only people who will be on his right and left are the two bandits who will be crucified with him. So Jesus goes on to try to spell it out once again. He has not come in pursuit of that kind of power. He has not come to be served – but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Put very simply, what James and John's request reveals is that, deep down, they are in this discipleship business for what they can get out of it. That's what their eyes are focused upon – what is in it for them – and it amounts to a kind of blindness. And I would like to probe this a bit deeper as it seems to me that these disciples are possessed of what we might call a contract mentality, and I would like to explore this a bit this morning and contrast it

with what we might call a covenant mentality – and I want to try to tease out the difference.

Think for a moment of what you do when you sign a contract. Your primary concern is really what you can get out of it. You may be prepared to negotiate and to compromise but at the end of the day you want to secure the best deal possible. And you want to minimise risk. You want to make sure that all possible circumstances are foreseen and covered and that you are not disadvantaged in any way. What we are basically talking about here is what has famously or infamously become known as ‘the art of the deal’, a phrase popularised by one very prominent world leader who prides himself on his claim to be a very successful business man. And of course contracts and deals are right and appropriate in business, though – as we are learning – they do not necessarily translate well into global relations and diplomacy (that’s another story). But the essence of the contract is what we get out of it and the contract culture stamps itself upon our world. It goes with a mentality where reward is a strong motivation to human behaviour and bonuses are written into contracts and expected – sometimes irrespective of performance, for that is how power games are played.

That contract mentality however is not just a feature of the modern world. It seems to be wired into our DNA and it has clearly influenced James and John because essentially they are reminding Jesus that following him creates expectations and obligations: we have followed you, we have left behind families and businesses and now, ‘we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’ That’s ‘the art of the deal’.

There is, however, a different mentality, and it’s one that lies at the heart of our faith and it’s defined not in terms of contract but of covenant – and here we enter into a completely different mindset. The classic and perhaps best known example of covenant is marriage – surely anyone who enters into marriage with an agenda of ‘what can I get out of this?’ is somehow missing the point. We’re not getting into it for what we can get out of it. And so there are those beautiful words in the marriage service,

For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer,  
in health and in sickness, to love, cherish and honour.

Marriage is not premised on contract and calculation – entering into it may bring loss and cost and it is certainly a huge risk. But covenant embraces risk, and loss, and cost. It leaves you vulnerable. And of course it is no accident

that in the Bible God does not do contracts. This is not an ‘art of the deal’ God. God makes covenants, with Israel, with the world, through Jesus Christ. And a God who comes to us in Christ to be served would be a contract God and the terms of the deal would all be spelt out and the penalties and the forfeits. But grace is a stranger to contract – and so Jesus, the very embodiment of grace tells us that he came not to be served, but to serve and to *give* - to give his life as a ransom for many.

But of course religion so easily adopts the contract mentality. Religion so easily tries to hook us by telling us what we will get out of it. And so in parts of the church, often – ironically - in the most poor and deprived places, there is the blasphemy of the so-called ‘prosperity gospel’ which assures us that when we come to Christ riches are all part of the deal. It’s a kind of a contract: believe and you will prosper! You get out of it what you put into it and what you put into it often goes into the pockets of obscenely wealthy pastors and evangelists. But the contract mentality enters religion too when people are cajoled to come to Christ because of what they’ll get out of it: ‘come to Jesus for peace and joy and wellbeing!’ And yes, certainly a living faith has beneficial consequences and it brings its blessings, of course. But there’s no *quid pro quo*, and as well as offering peace true faith can also be deeply disturbing and unsettling. All that Christ promises his disciples here is exactly the kind of opposition and rejection that he knew he was about to face: ‘The cup that I will drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptised, you will be baptised.’

I am reminded again of our midweek Bible Studies at present where we are looking at the Book of Daniel and it’s so interesting because in many ways the court of Babylon that is described there operates by a contract culture of reward and punishment, one that hinges on incentives and entitlement and where all eyes are on the greasy pole, for that is how power politics operates. And into all that steps Daniel and his companions who are wonderfully dismissive of contract incentives, motivated instead by covenant faithfulness to Israel’s God. And there is that wonderful moment when Daniel’s companions are threatened with being thrown into a burning fiery furnace for refusing to bow down to the great, idolatrous statue of King Nebuchadnezzar. And this is their defiant declaration: ‘If our God who we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will

not worship the golden statue...’ In other words our faithfulness is not dependent on what we get out of it. And it is not such a long journey from Babylon to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus awaits arrest and he prays that the cup of suffering might pass – ‘yet let it be your will and not mine.’ There is covenant faithfulness, for better or for worse, covenant faithfulness that subverts the contract mindset of the world. And of course that is why the real heroes of the Christian faith are not successful power-brokers but rather the martyrs. And we might think particularly today of Oscar Romero, former Archbishop of San Salvador who was canonised last week by his church – Romero who spoke out against the vicious ruling regime in his country and who was gunned down on March 24<sup>th</sup> 1980 as he lifted up the cup as he celebrated mass in a hospital chapel. Like Christ he came not to be served but to serve his people – and he paid the price.

So why do we do it? Why become a Christian? What is in it for us? What do we get out of it? Well, I am reminded of a passage in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians in the New Testament where Paul goes to some length to recount all the hardships and persecutions that he has endured for being a Christian: beatings, imprisonment, afflictions. So why does he do it? What conceivable motivation prompts him? And there comes this beautiful testimony: ‘For the love of Christ constrains us, because we are convinced that on has died for all... and he died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.’ What else is there to say? This strange love, the love of Christ, has grasped us and constrains us to live not for ourselves but for him who died and was raised for us.

It really doesn’t make a lot of sense to a world that lives by contract, by the art of the deal. The Christian life does not have a career plan. It is not about self-improvement or strategies for success. It’s not therapy for people who can’t cope with a crazy world. The Christian life is one that lives by symbols that Christ speaks of here in this passage: a cup that was drunk, telling of a love that reaches out to us and will not let us go; a baptism that symbolises dying and rising to new life. The love of Christ constrains us: ‘love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.’ Amen.

O holy and blessed God,  
we gather here in your presence,  
creatures before their Creator,  
mere human beings before the  
sovereign Creator of the universe,  
earthbound and limited as we are.  
And we come to praise you,  
aware as we are that our words fail us  
and our thoughts and imaginations  
fall short of the mystery and wonder  
of who you are.  
And yet, living God, you surprise us,  
you astound us by coming to us  
in the lowly figure of Jesus of Nazareth,  
in whom you have humbled yourself,  
taking the form of a servant,  
and coming not to be served but to serve  
and to give your life as a ransom for many.  
O God have mercy upon us we pray  
That we find it hard to love as you loved;  
hard to humble ourselves as you did,  
hard to serve as you served.  
Have mercy upon us and assure us of your grace  
That does not keep score,  
that does not keep account,  
but that keeps faith even when we do not.  
And so inspire us to live lives of service  
to you and to one another.  
And we pray all these things in Jesus' name  
and in his words we pray together, saying...