

Proper 24 Year B 2021

From the reading of the prophecy of Isaiah - 'It was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain'. Most of us know what it is like to be crushed. Which one of us has not been crushed at some time - by illness (our own or someone else's); by betrayal by someone we trusted; by bereavement; by loss of a job - or not getting the job we so longed for; by shame or humiliation? Each one of us will have our own personal experience of being crushed. And Christ, having endured the definitive crushing, shares our experiences - he has been there. He knows what it is like to carry an unbearable load of pain, of humiliation, of betrayal, of grief - and somehow bear the unbearable. But we have not been crushed to death. Wherever we go in our crushed-ness, Jesus has walked there before us.

As the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, it is not as if we have a great high priest who is incapable of understanding what we go through, because He was tempted, tempted almost to breaking point. Jesus knows what it is like to suffer, and therefore can offer all our suffering to the Father - our pain for healing, our sin for forgiveness, our betrayal for reconciliation, our death for resurrection.

It is the contradictory nature of crucifixion and resurrection that James and John, and indeed all the disciples, have failed to grasp. Three times on the walk from Caesarea Philippi, where Peter made his confession of faith - 'You are the Messiah', only to be called Satan by Jesus - three times on that walk to Jerusalem Jesus has told them about arrest, torture, crucifixion and resurrection; each time they have failed to understand, and not asked for explanation. They have argued amongst themselves which was the greatest, and ignored Jesus' warnings about the need to take up their cross. They are still in love with the idea of temporal power and glory. They may have left their fishing nets behind but they still carry a lot of baggage. And so the sons of Zebedee come with their sweeping request that Jesus does whatever they ask of him. The raw ambition is so blatant, so blatant that when Matthew describes these events he puts the request into the mouth of their mother, and Luke slides over this - too embarrassing! And when Jesus tells the brothers that they don't know what they are asking, they persist. Yes, we can drink your cup! Yes, we can be baptised with your baptism. No matter how much Jesus explains his messianic destiny in terms of suffering and service, the disciples seem incapable of

understanding and as a result fail to understand the meaning of discipleship.

The leadership of Jesus stands in sharp contrast to the disciples' understanding of leadership - and indeed our own. We think of leaders attaining material success, prestige, power over others and often subject to vanity and ambition - the more you have the more you want! And we bring our children up to think that way too - you have to do well, be top of the class, get on, be a success, come first, have the best seats in the house - perhaps we all have a little bit of Zebedee's DNA in our genes, even if we wouldn't admit it.

But if we wish to live the life of Christian discipleship, we have to squarely face the fact of our tendency to be sons - or daughters - of Zebedee and come to terms with our flawed humanity. We cannot be healed unless we acknowledge that we are in need of healing.

Jesus tells the brothers 'The cup that I drink, you will drink. With the baptism with which I am baptised you will be baptised'. It sounds like a threat or a warning. If you follow me, this is what you will go through - this is how you will suffer.

But what if we take his words not as threat but as promise? 'Yes, you will have pain in your lives, that is inevitable. You will be crushed; like me there will be times when you will pray "with loud cries and tears" as Hebrews puts it - but you won't stay in that place for ever. There will come the time when you are no longer driven by your frustrated ambition, your need for security or recognition - and you will find (or should I say, receive?) the power to take up your cross and follow me. Instead of running away and hiding, as the disciples did on the day of crucifixion, you will eventually become (as they did) faithful disciples, ready to serve rather than demanding to be served.

We have been ransomed - that is, set free - by Jesus, free from the domination system that demands hierarchy, tyranny, subservience, subordination, winners and losers, insiders and outsiders, honoured and shamed; set free to serve - willingly to serve, not forced to serve - to serve not only each other but also those pushed to the margins by the domination system, those cast out, ignored, diminished, crushed.

If Jesus could serve to the point of death and beyond, surely we can attempt to be his faithful disciples, to walk in his way, to be

channels of his peace, bearers of other peoples' burdens,  
servants of all?

Instead of asking God to do whatever we ask of Him, perhaps we  
should concentrate on discovering what God is asking of us - and  
then, to do the best in our ability, to do it.