**Family Service Talk 15th January 2023**

**Matthew 20:20-28**

***20 Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favour of him.***

***21 “What is it you want?” he asked.***

***She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.”***

***22 “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?”***

***“We can,” they answered.***

***23 Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, 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 by my Father.”***

***24 When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. 25 Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 26 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”***

How any times as a parent do you find yourself on the edge of your seat, desperate to speak out for one of your children. Maybe when they were little and were having a toy taken away by another child; maybe when at school they never seemed to get a good part in the school play; or maybe when the bigger children always seemed to reach the cake with the biggest cherry. As parents we want our children to be treated fairly and sometimes as a parent you have to speak up and maybe even fight for your child’s rights. I have a friend who has spent much of her adult life making sure that her disabled son has the support he needs. We want the best for our children.

What is sometimes difficult though, is knowing exactly what the best is. Is it the 6-month, no-expense-spared round the world Gap Year holiday or is it the 4-month trip to a tiny village in Africa to live with a local family while helping to build a school room in the village and then staying on the help teach the children?

Mrs. Zebedee, in our Bible passage, clearly knew what she thought was best for her sons – as did the sons, James and John, who were with her. In fact, Mrs Zebedee was possibly Salome, sister to Mary (mother of Jesus) and therefore Aunt to Jesus. James, John and Jesus would therefore have been cousins so she probably felt quite ok about having this chat with Jesus – keeping it all in the family so to speak. Surely the most important and treasured place to be was next to Jesus. There they could learn so much and be quite safe with their cousin …. but also of course bask in the honour of being next to the king …. Maybe that was the greater attraction?

And we have to remember that at this time the Jews were looking forward to the arrival of the Messiah, the one who would come to save them. The most obvious thing that the Jews thought the Messiah would have to save them from was the Romans who had come to the area probably more than 200 years before Jesus was born. As time went by their control of the area grew tighter and the Jews longed for their promised saviour to come and rescue them from Roman rule.

Four chapters earlier in Matthew’s gospel, we read of the moment that Peter was given a revelation by God that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited, promised Messiah and so from that moment the disciples (and probably their mothers!) must have been waiting for Jesus to overthrow the Romans and rule his people in glory …. Presumably from a large palace; presumably with hundreds of servants and soldiers loyal to him: and probably with as much fine food, wine, clothing and furniture as money could buy.

So, Mrs Zebedee was very keen that her boys would be a part of this newly established kingdom when it happened, indeed at the centre of the kingdom with the king, Jesus, …. at the most important part.

But …. there were two very important aspects of the situation about which Mrs Z had not thought at all ….

Firstly, ever since Peter had said that he thought that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus had spoken much about the way he was going to have to suffer and then die in order to save his people. And indeed, those who followed him would also have to suffer and maybe die. In fact, if the people thought back to what Isaiah and some of the other prophets had said hundreds of years earlier, they would recall talk of the Messiah being a suffering servant – not quite the same as the glorious, victorious king that the Jews were hoping for.

And in our reading, Jesus makes it very clear that James and John will indeed go through much suffering if they follow him. We are not told of the reaction of their mother, but James and John are up for this and say yes, they can and will follow the path of suffering as they follow Jesus. (And they do indeed …. James was killed for his faith and John was sent into exile on the Island of Patmos.)

Secondly however, Jesus then drew a very final line under Mrs. Z’s request …. It was not for him to decide who would go where in the kingdom, only his Father, God in heaven, had that authority.

We don’t know what the reaction of the brothers or their mother was but we do know that the rest of the disciples were pretty mad that the question had even been asked. And their indignation prompted Jesus to explain again how in God’s kingdom, things are very different. Compared to the worldly ways, it seems very topsy-turvy …. Those who want to be great, those who want to lead must actually live a life of service to others.

The worldly perception of greatness and leadership does indeed include all the things about which Mrs Zebedee may have been thinking – palaces, riches, finery etc and they may indeed be involved but …. what is important to God is how the person lives and relates to others. Do they live to serve others; do their actions show a love, care and concern for those whom they lead; are you as likely to find them washing up at the end of a party as to be sitting with their feet up eating chocolate?

But Jesus did not stop at saying that we must serve others if we want to lead or be thought of as great, he then spoke of his own role as Messiah. Yes, he was the Messiah and indeed is king and deserves to be served but …. He came to earth to serve those for whom he had come – including the weak, the sinful, the poor, the needy, the unloved, those who think themselves unlovable. And Jesus served each one of them in the ultimate way – he came to die so that they (and we) might be saved from the death that they (and we) deserve because of the sin that holds each one of us captive. Only Jesus’ death could do this …. the death of a perfect sacrifice instead of sinful humans.

What an act of service – the ultimate servant king.

And our response to Jesus’ incredible servanthood is to follow his way - to serve others; to put the needs of others first; to seek to be lowly and humble in our service of all. And as we serve those around us, we can know that we are serving Christ and bringing our lives as a daily offering of worship to the Servant King. Amen