

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 20:20-28

“Preferred Seating”

What a privilege it is to be able to tell the story of Jesus Christ. It is not a made up story – it is His story – History – it happened! We are so blessed to have the four Evangelists keeping the records and sharing with us the message that Jesus has for all of us that the love of God the Father is not earmarked for a specific people group – it is earmarked for those who believe in Jesus. What a privilege it is for us to share that message together. I must tell you that the first reading this morning is another example of God's love for His people. You see – the Jordan River is a very special place. If you recall in Joshua, the priests carried the Ark of the Covenant across the river – and when their toes touched the water, it rolled back - very similar to what happened at the Red Sea, and they walked across on dry ground. In today's reading we have Elijah and Elisha – with Elijah taking his heavenly ride and he leaves his mantle, his robe. Elisha takes that robe and he asks “where is God?” He then takes the robe, just like Elijah did. Elijah had touched the water and it separated – to the right and the left (which is what the reading from 2 Kings 2:1-15 told us) just like the Red Sea – telling us something amazing was going to happen with God. Something amazing DID happen! God took His prophet to heaven in bodily form – on a fiery chariot with fiery horses. And then Elisha took that mantle and touched the water, and he walked across the Jordan on dry ground, and the people who witnessed that said wow, something is happening here! The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha, and they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. If I know anything about Elisha and what took place after that – He didn't take the honor and the glory, instead he gave it all to the Lord.

In today's Gospel – we see two of Jesus' most trusted disciples, James and John – have their mother do their asking for them. Remember when you were younger and you really wanted something and you just knew that Dad would say no? Who would you go to first? Momma! I did, and I am sure most of y'all did too! Well James and John had their mother go to Jesus and ask about their place in His coming kingdom – she wanted to know, like any good Jewish mother, “where are my boys going to sit? *“One at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.”* Jesus had already promised “thrones” (although the disciples probably misconstrued the meaning) when He said that the twelve disciples would *“sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”* (Matthew 19:28) In the ancient royal courts, those who were chosen to sit at the right and left hands of the king were the most powerful people in the kingdom. James and John's mother wanted to make sure that her sons would sit right beside Christ in his glory—the most honored places in the kingdom. They had heard Jesus say that He would have a kingdom; they understood that Jesus would be glorified (James and John had both seen the Transfiguration (Jesus, Moses and Elijah in glory) along with Peter, and had not told anyone about it, as Jesus had commanded). James and John's mother wanted to make sure that they would sit at the most honored place in the kingdom, next to Jesus in His Glory. They had already witnessed the Transfiguration, and they approached Him as loyal subjects to their king. They had just heard Him say that they were going to Jerusalem where He would be arrested and die – yet I don't think they really got it, just yet! All they were concerned with was

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coming before Him and getting a seat – they were pre-occupied with “where they were going to sit in the kingdom” that they missed the tragedy that was foretold by Jesus. They didn’t have a clue.

It was not until after Jesus’ death and Resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, that they fully understood that Jesus’ kingdom was not of this world. It was not centered in palaces and thrones, but in the hearts and lives of Jesus’ followers. The mother of James and John asked Jesus to give her sons special positions in His kingdom – since they were in “the inner circle.” Parents naturally want to see their children do well – gaining honors and promotions, but it can be a problem if they lose sight of God’s specific will for their children. God may have different work in mind—not as glamorous - but just as important.

Please turn with me to page 1534 of our Pew Bibles to see how Jesus answered: verse 22 “*You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?*” They said to him, “**We can.**” Jesus’ response to her and to her Sons of Thunder (sons of Zebedee) - who were apparently standing right there, that in making such a self-centered request, they did not know what they were asking. **Asking for positions of highest honor meant also to ask for deep suffering** and there was no way they could have one without the other.

Jesus had been teaching them about glory through suffering, but the disciples still did not get it - they really didn’t understand it yet. Jesus asked if they were *able to drink the cup* that He would drink. **The Greek indicates that this is an event that hasn’t happened yet but is so absolutely certain to happen that it can be spoken of as already having happened.** The “cup” to which Jesus referred is the same “cup” that He would ask His Father in His prayer in Garden of Gethsemane. It is **the cup of suffering** that He would have to drink in order to bring salvation to sinners. Along with it, He was going to:

- endure horrible physical pain,
- and He would also bear the wrath of God’s punishment for the world’s sin, causing Him to be abandoned by God for even a brief moment in time.

Jesus’ “cup” of suffering was one of a kind and only He could drink from it. What Jesus was asking James and John was if they were ready to suffer for the sake of the kingdom? They both quickly replied to Jesus’ question, saying that that they were *able* to drink the cup. I don’t think that their answer was as much about pride as it was showing **their willingness to follow Jesus - whatever the cost might be**, to fight the battle that was going to be ahead of them. As loyal followers, they hoped to receive honor along with Jesus when He would establish His kingdom; however, when **they fell asleep** in the Garden of Gethsemane, **it showed how unready they really were** for what this “cup” entailed. They did not yet understand what the Prophet Isaiah had foretold about the Messiah in Isaiah 53:10-12 that He would be the “Suffering servant.”

God the Father gave us - through His Son - the priceless gift of salvation, and it is free, but being a follower of Jesus isn’t painless or easy. Everyday life tests our commitment to Christ and even our loved ones will face their own challenges in following Jesus. We need to be like

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Barnabas's - encouraging one another instead of wondering who will be greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Each of these beloved friends of Jesus would indeed drink from the cup, but in different ways:

- James died as a martyr—Herod ordered for him to be put to death by the sword, as we are told in Acts 12:2.
- John was poisoned by Rome – but he miraculously survived. He was punished by the Romans and forced to live through many years of persecution before being forced to live the last years of his life in exile on the island of Patmos. God had a plan for John, because on that island of Patmos, he was given the Revelation of Our Lord Jesus Christ, which is indeed the last book of our Holy Bible.

Although Jesus knew that these two disciples would face great suffering, this still did not mean that He would grant their request for great honor. Suffering is the price of greatness, and the price required to follow Jesus Christ. They would follow and they would suffer, but that alone would not allow them to sit at His right and left hand in the kingdom of God!

Jesus would not make that decision;

- those places of honor were reserved for as He said “*those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.*” Just read Revelation chapter 7 and see those who would be there ready and willing to praise and worship the Lamb in the celestial court.
- By Jesus saying that God already knew who would gain those places of great honor, He reveals to us the character of God – that He is all knowing! (besides all loving!)

Jesus' words show us that, although He will distribute eternal rewards. The Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 4:8 tells us that “*in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.*” He will do so in obedience to the Father's decisions. In this statement – Jesus reveals that He was under the authority of the Father, and it is HE alone who makes the decisions about leadership in heaven -

- which are not granted as favors and are reserved for those whom God selects. This is NOT about making a reservation for preferred seating!

Isn't it ironic that these two Sons of Thunder – who faithfully asked to be on either side of Jesus, would see two others take the place to the right and the left of Christ, not in His kingdom – but on the cross at Calvary. Matthew 27:38 tells us that “*two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left.*” Jesus didn't mock James and John for asking, but He did deny their request – for He knew what was best for them.

I truly believe that Jesus wants us to know that we can feel free to ask God for anything,

- But, we need to keep in mind that the answer may not be yes, or it may be not now.
- God wants to give us what is best for us, not merely what we want!