

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

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Scripture: Matthew 20:20-28

“The Right Hand”

In today's Holy Gospel – two of Jesus' most trusted disciples and members of His 'inner circle' – known by many name; they are called the 'sons of Zebedee' or the one I really like – 'the sons of Thunder!' I really would have liked to have met 'Thunder.' That has got to be Zebedee, but their names are James and John. They have their mother come to Jesus and ask Him about their place in His coming kingdom. She wanted to know where her two sons would sit, "*one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.*" Jesus had already promised "thrones" (although the disciples probably misunderstood or 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 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 was seeking what any good Jewish mother would be seeking for her sons – job security! She 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 already understood that Jesus would be glorified; James and John had both seen the Transfiguration along with Peter, as they traveled to the Mount of Transfiguration, not far from Caesarea Philippi, where Peter proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the Living God when Jesus asked them '*who do you say that I am?*' They witnessed Jesus in a way that nobody else had – they saw Him transfigured – changed – what He was wearing became whiter than white (and it didn't have anything to do with 'Ajax'.) Jesus was brilliant in glory and so were the two who were next to Him – Moses and Elijah. Jesus stood right between Moses (the Law) and Elijah (the Prophets.) Didn't Jesus say "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.*" (Matthew 5:17) Here He was in front of Peter, James and John showing that He is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. Of course Jesus told them not to tell anyone about it.

And so this day 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 – but it is my opinion that I think they really didn't get what that all meant! When it did happen – they ran! All they were concerned with was coming before Jesus and getting a seat; they were so pre-occupied with where they were going to sit in the kingdom that they missed the tragedy that Jesus foretold. Jesus was telling them what was going to be happening. In today's lingo – we would say 'They didn't have a clue.'

It was not until after Jesus' death, burial, Resurrection, Ascension 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 believers in Jesus - His followers. The mother of James and John asked Jesus to give her sons special positions in His kingdom – since they were already 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

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lose sight of God’s specific will for their children. God may have different work in mind—not as glamorous - but just as important.

Jesus answered, “*You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?*” They said to him, “**We can.**” Jesus’ response to her (momma) and to her ‘Sons of Thunder’ - 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 asking 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. This takes me to a place in Scripture in which Jesus talks about a certain ‘cup.’ **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.** Greek is so far different from our English that when you look at verbs and follow their meaning and seeing what the actual intent was – sometimes it is absolutely awe inspiring. The “cup” to which Jesus referred is the same “cup” that He speaks of with His Father during 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, Jesus was going to:

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

Jesus’ ‘cup’ of suffering was one of a kind and only He could drink from it. It was that ‘cup’ Jesus asked His Father to take from Him; “*Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.*” (Luke 22:42) 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 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, about Jesus of Nazareth, 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 while it is free - 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 a ‘Barnabas’ – an encourager - 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:

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- James (whose Feast we celebrate today) 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.

Although Jesus knew that these two disciples would face great suffering, this still did not mean that He would grant their request for a place of 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!

Jesus’ words show us that, and 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.

Isn’t it ironic that these two Sons of Thunder, James and John – 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.

My brothers and sisters, if we learn anything from today’s message it is 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, and not merely what we want!