

The 20th Sunday after Trinity
St Briavels, Hewelsfield, & the Chase, 2021

Hebrews 5:1-10

Mark 10:35-45

Given the ongoing restrictions in this church, and indeed in many others across the country, around sharing the cup at communion at the moment, I must admit to a wry chuckle when I read the verse from today's gospel: 'are you able to drink the cup that I drink?' Particularly when the disciples reply, 'we are able!'

But you don't want another sermon on the pandemic, so although we will come back to that line in a little bit, that is not the direction I'm taking this morning.

I actually think today's gospel reading is a very honest snapshot of the first disciples trying to work out what on earth was going on. They kind of keep getting it wrong don't they? First of all James and John come up to Jesus with this request for really good seats in heaven. And it's really interesting, this request doesn't fit. Because we don't really know what the motivation was. Some preachers will tell you that this is an example of arrogance, which is something we need to guard against. Why on earth would anyone have the audacity to ask to sit right next to Jesus in the kingdom? But there's a kinder way of reading it, which is that actually we all want to be close to God don't we? Isn't that what we pray for? Isn't that what we are working towards, that closeness of relationship. And actually if you or I had the opportunity to talk face-to-face with Christ, wouldn't we try to get as close to him as possible?

Then a bit later in the passage we see the rest of the disciples getting it wrong as well. When they hear this request they start to get really stroppy with James and John, so you've got ten of the disciples having a go at the other two. And Jesus doesn't like that either, and has to give them another talking to.

We are approaching the end of another Christian year. As you will remember the church doesn't count its years from January to January like the secular calendar. We count from advent to advent, from the beginning of December (-ish) to the beginning of December each year. And you might notice that as we get towards the end of each year the readings that we are given invites us to think about the nature of the family of God. They are very often pointing us towards what heaven might look like, and what the world currently looks like, and how we might manage the difference. You'll see that as the next five or six weeks unfold, leading us to another advent.

So whether you think the request about good seats in heaven is really cheeky, or motivated from perfectly pure intentions, what we get today is a reminder about where we are and who we are right now. What the church is *like*. What is being a Christian *like*. And therefore what might the world be like as well.

So the first bit of the conversation, James and John asking to sit at the right hand left hand of Christ in heaven, reminds us of our place in all of this. Jesus says, there are ways in which you are really close to me, but there are some things that have to wait.

And isn't it interesting that he asks those two questions, can you drink my cup, and can you be baptised like me? And you might think I'm reading too much into this, but I think here we have a glimmer of Jesus talking about the ways in which we will come

closest to him here on earth: in baptism and in Holy Communion.

You will remember that the Church of England says that there are two sacraments: baptism and Holy Communion. Other churches suggest that there might be more sacraments than that. The Roman Catholic Church for example identifies seven. But for us, there are these two particular ways in which we encounter God, we encounter Christ most particularly. What's really interesting is that one of them is unrepeatable: that's baptism. In theory at least, once you are baptised you can never be baptised again, and you can never be unbaptised. Whether you are baptised as a little tiny baby, or at a hundred years old, what happens at the font changes something deep down at the level of our soul. We become a Christian.

I sometimes say when I'm preaching at a baptism that at the font God attaches his unbreakable elastic band to us. I've probably told you this before. And no matter how far we roam, no matter how far away from God we might wander, we are always attached to him by that elastic band that leads us back to the place of our new identity as his people.

But then the other sacrament is the one that we can repeat over and over again. Holy Communion. And even in these times where that is a bit impaired by social distancing and precautions, and where quite literally at the moment we cannot drink the cup that Christ drinks, it's no less true that in this meal that we come back to over and over again, month by month, week by week, season by season, we are fed from the Lord's table. We become his people again and again. And just like eating nourishes our physical bodies, and if we stop eating for too long we start to waste away, so we don't want to be too long away from the table of God, because by meeting him here each week or each

month, we become invigorated again, we become enlivened again, and we feel the tug of that elastic band again.

So Jesus says to James and John: it's too early to be worrying about seats in heaven, but here are two ways in which you can be assured that you are close to me. You can be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised. You can drink the cup that I drink. And that's very Jesus isn't it? Faced with something that might be interpreted as a rather rude question, or at least a bit bolshie, Jesus flips it and says, but actually let's talk about the ways in which you are really close to me.

And then at the end of the reading when the other ten get angry with James and John for even asking this question, again Jesus calms them down and says this is actually all about service. Interestingly in the King James version the word 'slave' and the word 'servant' that we heard in today's reading both translate as 'minister'. Proper living is about *ministry*. It is about *service*.

And on the first Sunday after the murder of another member of Parliament going about their routine community engagement, we do well to be reminded that the hallmark of the Christian family is service. It is not about comfortable seats. It is not about scoring points. It is about how can I best serve my neighbour. How can I be of service to my neighbour. How can I follow the footsteps of the one who came to serve.

We live in a pretty poisonous age. We live in an age, I think fuelled particularly by the anonymity of social media, but fuelled also by an increasingly polarised public conversation, in which the object is to win. The object is to defeat the person I disagree with. And to do it publicly. And then to brag about the victory. We live in an age where defeating someone could actually look like murdering them. Where a response to

someone we object to might actually be to kill them. We must stand up to that rhetoric. We must resist it. We must remember that the hallmark of the kingdom identity is service. Ministry.

May David Amess rest in peace and rise in glory, and may the church of which he was a committed member remember its identity: connected to the font, and fed by the sacrament, to serve our community, to be the least of all, to minister into the darkness as well as the light.

Amen.