

Fr Paul's Homily - 18th October 2009

29th Sunday in the Year of Mark

Who could blame James and John? Jesus had spoken to them three times about the fact that they were following him on the way to Jerusalem. There he would suffer a violent death and rise again. One thing was clear. They had failed to understand what he was talking about even though, with Peter and unlike the other apostles, they had experienced the Transfiguration.

Perhaps it was Jesus' talk of the brutal treatment he would receive in Jerusalem ending in an ignominious death that frightened James and John and they wanted to ensure a good outcome for themselves before any of the other apostles made a claim. Could it have been that they were blind to Jesus' talk of suffering and death and just kept their minds on the experience of the Transfiguration of Jesus and considered him to be the Messiah who would overcome the political power?

"We want you to do us a favour....allow us to sit one at your right and one at our left in your glory." With the people of their time they would believe that the glory that the Messiah promised would be rather like sitting in the best places at a banquet. The places of honour at the high table. Yet Jesus had consistently taught that his kingdom was not about honour..."unless you welcome the kingdom like little children you cannot enter it....sell all you have and give the money to the poor."

We are more fortunate than James and John. We know that what Jesus is offering is not status or power. He is offering a share in his glory which is the life of God and a share in the life of the Trinity. Fear had blinded James and John and they wanted to escape from the inevitable suffering of being human and that is where we need to be on our guard.

The glory that Jesus is offering is the fullness of being human. Life is a journey in time and love where we never find complete satisfaction of our desires. We use our energy and intellect to make the soundest progress we can to being fully alive as human beings. Built into us is that desire for love and to become fully ourselves.

That fullness of life that we all desire and for which God created us cannot be ours in this life. We can glimpse it in joy, delight and pleasure but these always fade and we start the search all over again. Often the joy and delight are short lived and broken because of some event that brings suffering and even death.

But we are not to be without hope. Yes, we are on our way to glory, yes the life of God within us guarantees to transform the business of being human into the fullness and perfection of joy and yes Jesus as God enters the experience of human suffering and death and makes it the way to resurrection and life to the full.

This was an obstacle for James and John, and possibly the others, they could not see how suffering and death could be the way to life. It was a contradiction for them. There must be no contradiction for us. Life is a journey to God and the fullness of life. The suffering and dying which is part of being human and alive is now transformed into the way to glory because we share in the Lord's own death.

James and John were looking for an escape a bit like a long summer holiday when it would all be blue skies and sandy beaches. After Jesus' death they would come to see that Jesus' cross had made the difficult bits of life the way to glory and the way to life.

There is a line in the ordination ceremony of a priest which says that the person ordained must model their lives on the Lord's Cross. At Baptism and Confirmation we are signed with the Cross because it is the way to life and because it is the way in which we are to live our lives.

When the other ten heard about James' and John's request for a place they were not too pleased. These two favourites of Jesus had tried to get ahead without any consideration for the others. Jesus reminds them and us that as his disciples we are called to a life of service which involves not being a ruler but a servant, not being a servant but a slave, not being first but last and being ready to give and use our lives for the good of others. This is precisely what Jesus did on the Cross.

So how are we to live our lives in the kind of way that Jesus describes, a life modelled on his cross which involves giving everything away and being the last of all and least of all?

In his teaching today Jesus turned the assumptions of his time and people about the way life should be, completely upside down, which is what prompted James and John to ask their question.

We are called to do the same.

In a world where success is measured by levels of wealth and purchasing power we have to show that wealth and power are gifts to be squandered in love.

In a world where all choices are seen as of equal value, where life is regarded as a commodity, where I can do what I like with what is mine, we must show that life and creation are priceless gifts to be treated with a respect that images the love of God himself.

In a world where billions of people are struggling to remain alive and find enough to eat, we are those who must show an alternative way by living simply so that others may live. We are invited to simplify our lifestyles for the good of others.

In a world of exploitation and greed we are those who are called to treat every human being that enters our lives as a gift from God, using every opportunity for forgiveness and welcome.

In a world where hope is so easily destroyed let us be constant in hope placing our trust in the death and resurrection of Christ which is our life and our joy.