

Hinde Street Methodist church

Sunday 18th October 2015 11am

Mark 10: 35-45

Last Sunday there was a bit of a scandal.

Jeremy Corbyn should have been kneeling before the Queen at Buckingham Palace.

Swearing his loyalty as a new member of the Privy Council.

Instead he was hiking in the West of Scotland, and stopping for fish and chips and a soft drink.

The Sunday Times got very hot under the collar about this whole incident.

Reading their story online, I'm not entirely sure why.

Was it because he wasn't showing proper respect to our reigning monarch?

Was it because politicians and people in public life shouldn't really skive off for a holiday when there is work to be done?

Was it because the soft drink suggests he is a bit of a big girl's blouse?

In today's gospel reading, the disciples are still struggling to figure out their attitude to work and to status.

Even though many of them started life as fishermen, the appropriate drink with fish and chips doesn't seem to be an issue.

But James and John are longing for recognition for all they have done.

They want to short-circuit the road to Jerusalem, the arrest, the trial, the suffering, the dying.

They want to go straight through to glory.

The respect they deserve.

And I can just imagine them saying, 'I haven't had a holiday in three years.'

They want their work, their sacrifice to be appreciated.

Chairs on Jesus' left and right.

Well done, thou good and faithful servant.

So Jesus takes them back, yet again, to the phrase that has been a kind of refrain in the last few chapters of Mark's gospel.

Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.

And whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

Many who are first will be last

and the last will be first.

*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all
and servant of all.*

You would think they would have got it by now.

Jesus has repeated it over and over again.

More than that.

He has embodied it.

The young man who has kept all the religious rules since he was a child goes away sad.

The children are welcomed with open arms.

But somehow it seems to be hard for them to get hold of.

Us too.

Recognition and reward are built into our DNA.

It's not fair if we slave away week after week arranging the flowers, or making the coffee, or handing out the hymn books, and no-one notices.

We too want to hear the words; 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant.'

Is Jesus saying that it just doesn't matter?

That we should all stop fighting for a living wage, and do our work without complaining?

That it's OK for some people to take home in a day what others will take a year to earn?

That being a doormat is its own reward?

I think, as so often, there are different gospels for different readers.

Jesus isn't telling James and John that what they have done, what they have given up, is not important.

God doesn't care.

God wasn't really paying attention.

God has more important things to worry about than saying thank you.

Just get on with it and don't moan.

Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.

And whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

The gospel for those who are doing it for glory, is that the first will become last.

You need to get down off your high horse.

Step down from the moral high ground.

Stop looking for approbation.

Stop thinking you deserve something special because you have been on church council for far longer than the regulation six years.

Stop making others feel guilty because they don't give up as much spare time to the church as you do.

That's not the point.

The gospel for those who are doing the quiet jobs, the small jobs, the un-noticed jobs, year after year, is that the last will become first.

God does care.

God is paying attention.

These may not be the glamorous, high-profile, everyone-knows-you kind of tasks.

But they are all equally important.

Just as the body couldn't function without all its constituent parts.

The very visible eyes and ears.

And the humble, hidden, backs of the knees.

Stuff those envelopes with pride!

And the gospel for those who are not doing anything?

The disciples who didn't have the courage to leave their nets, say goodbye to their homes and families?

The ones who made it to Jerusalem, and then ran away when the going got tough?

Yes, that was all of them.

All except a few, unimportant women.

The gospel makes it clear that we are all valued.

We are not judged by this moment, those words, that failure of nerve.

The people who need to come to church, but just don't have the time or the energy or the confidence to sign up to the myriad things that need doing to keep this place going?

You are loved.

You are welcomed into the kingdom.

Like the children whom Jesus sets in the centre of the crowd, even though they are not economically productive, even though the disciples think they don't have anything to say that is worth listening to –

It is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.

Today we are commissioning the class leaders and assistants.

They are the people that make it possible for us to meet in small groups, week by week, month by month, to support each other in our life of faith.

They are the people who keep in touch.

Who visit the sick.

Who remind you that you matter.

Social holiness, John Wesley called it.

You can't be a Christian on your own.

We are also commissioning the Junior Church leaders and assistants.
They are the people who embody the way we value the children in our community.

But we are also remembering all those who support the life of this church.
The things that are done, quietly, behind the scenes, without which we wouldn't be here as a congregation.

And we are recognising all those who are drawn to this place.
Those who are new to the church.
Those who need to be here on a Sunday, but are just not in a position to do any more.
Those who come when they can.

Because the important thing is not so much what we do.
It's certainly not the status or the reward or the recognition.
It's not the public commissioning.
The important thing is why we do what we do.
Why we feel it's important to run classes and lead Junior Church and arrange flowers and make tea and design posters.
Why we come here on a Sunday morning to listen and to sing and to pray.
Why we creep up on God, hoping to touch the hem of his garment.

The important thing is that between us, we are trying to be a Christian community.
We are trying to embody the values of the kingdom.
We are trying to say that the way the world works – the financial rewards, the status thing, the huge gap between those who have it all, and those who have nothing – that's not how we want to be.
We want to welcome everybody.
We want to be inclusive.
We want to offer people space to be themselves.
We want to value them not for what they can do, but for who they are.

And of course, for this to happen, jobs have to be done.
This being Methodism, tea does have to be made.
And drunk.
But that's not the point.
The point is the community we are building.
And that's what we are celebrating today.
So James and John will have their reward.
But the reward won't be seats of honour.
It won't be status.
It won't be an opportunity to move up the discipleship pecking order.

The reward is being part of the kingdom.

Part of the new community of people who suddenly, unexpectedly, find themselves in partnership with God.

Who find that everything they do and everything they are is imbued with a new significance.

It really means something.

It really matters.

That's the glory.

Amen.