

Mk 10:35-45

Tim Anderson 2/7/2023

A blank cheque

I have a horror of writing blank cheques.

I love my wife.

I can't imagine why God was so kind to me
as to give me such a good wife.

I certainly don't deserve it.

But there are some things I won't even do for my wife.

And writing blank cheques is one of them.

"Honey could you do me a favour?"

"My darling, I would love to be of assistance,
but before committing myself to whatever it is you require,
I'm going to need to know what it is."

If she asks me to do something I don't want to do,
I don't want to be put in the position of being told
that I have already committed to help.

OK I'm fully expecting to have a queue of women after the service
telling me how unbelievably selfish I am.

But here's my defence.

Jesus didn't like writing blank cheques either.

10:35 "James and John the sons of Zebedee came to him,
"Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask.""

That sounds like a blank cheque.

We'll ask you to do something, Jesus,
but we won't tell you what it is until you say yes.

Well Jesus was not fooled.

This shouldn't surprise you.

Knowing exactly what was in people's hearts,
he knew they were going to ask something inappropriate.

In fact he probably knew exactly what they were going to ask.

He just wanted them to say it out loud
so they couldn't deny that's what was on their mind.

10:36 "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

Very sensible question.

But it elicits a not so sensible request.

10:37 "Let one of us sit at your right and the other on your left in your glory."

Now this is inappropriate at a number of levels.

Number one, Jesus has 12 disciples.

Suppose he was about to give out the places of honour in the Kingdom of God.

There are 10 other disciples.

James and John are trying to steal a march on their brothers in arms here.

That doesn't exactly make for good relations in the team, does it?

What do you think the other 10 disciples

thought about James and John wanting the best places?

You don't have to imagine it.

Verse 41 tells you.

10:41 "When the 10 heard about this, they became indignant with James and John."

And I don't think we should think

that the 10 were thinking along these lines.

"Now come on James and John,

you know that it is better to serve than to be served.

You guys need to grow in your godliness at this point."

I think that would be decidedly too charitable.

You can bet your last denarius

that their thoughts were going along these lines,

"Hey you guys!

I'm just as worthy of high honour as you are.

What makes you more worthy of high honour than I am?"

In other words,

the big difference between James and John and the other 10 disciples

was not that James and John were grasping at power

and the other 10 disciples

were exhibiting the humility of the Lord Jesus.

No, not at all.

The big difference was that James and John thought of grabbing the best spots in the kingdom first. And if the other 10 had thought of it earlier, then they would have done it too.

So that's reason number 1 it's an inappropriate request. James and John are trying to clamber over other people to grab something for themselves.

Reason number 2 I mentioned last week, you might remember it if you were here.

Jesus has just given his disciples a detailed description of how he's going to be humiliated, tortured and killed.

Is this really the time to be discussing the best spots in the kingdom?

When your dad sits the children down

to tell them about how he's just been diagnosed with cancer, is that the time

to discuss which kid is going to get the ride on mower when dies?

Clearly not.

James and John have misread the moment quite spectacularly.

How does Jesus respond to their inappropriate request?

10:38 "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said,

Can you drink the cup I drink

or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?"

Jesus turns their minds straight to the suffering he must face.

The cup Jesus drinks is the wine of God's wrath.

It might not be a totally familiar picture to us.

But it occurs quite often in the Old Testament prophets.

And it's also in the book of Revelation.

The picture is that when God wants to judge,

he gives a cup filled with wine for the person or nation to drink.

The wine represents his wrath.

Wrath is different from anger.

Anger is an emotion.
You feel angry.
Something strikes you as wrong and you feel hostile about it.
Wrath is a settled hostility towards something you oppose.
God's wrath is directed towards those who ignore his commands,
who treat him as if he didn't exist,
who fail to give him the honour and praise he is due.
God puts that wrath metaphorically in a cup of wine
and Jesus drinks it.
Jesus is talking about the cross.
On the cross,
God's wrath at sin and sinners
is poured out on Jesus.
Jesus takes the penalty because we could not.
That is the cup he drinks.
It is also the baptism he is baptised with.
To be baptised is to be drenched.
That's what the word means.
If you are baptised
then you are totally immersed in something.
When Jesus went to the cross,
he was baptised in pain and suffering.
He was drenched in the feeling of being alone
because his relationship with the Father was broken.
The cup looks at the cross from the Father's perspective.
On the cross the Father's wrath is satisfied.
The baptism looks at the cross from Jesus' perspective.
On the cross, the Son endured suffering
beyond what any other human has ever had to bear.

And so Jesus asks James and John,
"Can you drink the cup I drink
or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?"
The answer is transparently they can not.
The reason that Jesus had to go to the cross on our behalf

is that no one else could do it.
Only a perfect sacrifice could pay the price of sin.
Only Jesus lived a perfect life.
Only Jesus had a perfect sacrifice to offer.
James and John, you and I, we are not up to it.

But part of their being not up to it
is that they don't understand it.
10:39 "We can," they answered."
Who knows what question they think Jesus is asking them?
Maybe "Can you stick with me through thick and thin?"
Maybe they don't really care what Jesus is asking them.
Just so long as he says yes
to them being on his right and his left in glory
they will promise anything
and worry about what they have signed themselves up for later.

Now here's where it gets a little confusing.
Particularly if you are a black and white sort of person.
They claim they can drink the cup Jesus drinks
and be baptised with the baptism Jesus gets.
I said that's not possible.
Only Jesus can die for the sins of the world.
We can't save ourselves.
But Jesus says,
10:39 "You will drink the cup I drink
and be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with."
What does he mean there?

I think he's accommodating himself to their understanding.
They don't understand
that he's talking about dying for the sins of the world.
But they do understand that the cup and the baptism involve suffering.
OK, that's how you understand it James and John,
we're you will.

James died as a martyr.
John was imprisoned for years on the Island of Patmos.
The servant is not greater than the master.
If they treated Jesus that way,
we can expect they will treat his disciples that way also.

But even though they will suffer for their faith,
they are still out of luck when it comes to the best places in glory.
10:40 "But to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant.
These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."
If the places at Jesus' right and left are not for him to grant,
who decides?
It can only be God the Father.
God the Father has prepared in advance
who will have the best seats in heaven.

There are a couple of things worth teasing out there.
First there's something about the relationship
between the Father and the Son.
God the Father and God the Son are equal.
John 10:30 Jesus said "I and the Father are one".
John 14:9 "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."
And yet despite the fact they are equal,
there are many Bible verses
that point to the Son submitting to the Father.
This verse is one of them,
but there are others.
Another example is Mt 24:36
It's talking about the return of Jesus.
"But about that day or hour no one knows,
not even the angels in heaven,
nor the Son, but only the Father."
I think what that tells us is that you can have equality
and you can have submission
at the same time in the same relationship.

That's a very counter cultural message for our world.
The only equality our world will recognise
is an equality of power and authority.
But that's not God's way.

A second thing to tease out is the basis
on which positions of honour are awarded in the Kingdom of God.
Clearly those positions of honour
go to the people the Father has prepared them for.
But who has he prepared them for?

Well I think it's striking
that James and John ask Jesus a question about glory,
and Jesus gives them an answer about suffering.
"You want to sit at my right and left in glory,
tell me about how much you will suffer for the kingdom."

It does feel like the measure of greatness in the Kingdom
is tied up with suffering for the kingdom on earth.
That's why the resurrected Jesus still has the scars of crucifixion.
When Jesus rose from the dead,
everything about his body was made perfect.
He could appear and disappear at will.
He could ascend on a cloud into heaven.
Everything is perfect.
But the scars of the crucifixion remain.

Why?
Because the scars are the measure of his greatness.
What does Paul tell the Philippians?
2:8-9 "Being found in appearance as a man he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death even death on a cross.
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name."

Did you catch the word 'therefore'?
It wasn't just that Jesus died and then he was exalted.
It was that Jesus died and therefore God exalted him.
The reason for his pre-eminence is he gave up the most.

There's a tight connection between what you give up
and your greatness in the kingdom of God.
Jesus makes that connection for his disciples.
James and John are clambering over each other,
looking for the positions of greatness.
Jesus tells them how you really get greatness in the kingdom.
10:42-44 "You know that those who are regarded
as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them,
and their high officials exercise authority over them.
Not so with you.
Instead,
whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,
and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all."
We know that worldly greatness
is about how many people you can command.
The general is greater than the sergeant
because the general commands an army
and a sergeant commands only a platoon.
The CEO is the greatest in the company
because he is the boss of everyone.
Greatness in the kingdom of God turns this on its head.
Greatness is about who you can serve.
How much can you serve?
What can you give up in order to serve?

When Captain Mike Oborn was in Hastings,
I got him to come and speak at a couple of men's breakfasts.
Now Mike is in worldly terms
someone who has a decent level of greatness.
He's a Captain in the navy.
He was at that time the commander of HMAS Cerberus.
That means he had 2400 people under his direct command.
That's a lot.
You say it fast, it slips off your tongue.
But that's 30 Holy Trinity Hastings churches full of people.

But after the men's breakfasts he made a point of doing the dishes.
No other invited speak helps with the dishes.
I don't expect them to.
And remember
this was before Mike and Jill started coming along to Holy Trinity.
They were still going to Gateway Church.
But after breakfast he helped with the dishes.
Why?
It's a discipline for him.
He knows that true greatness is about service.
And when you are a Captain in the navy,
you have to keep reminding yourself of that
because everything around you keeps telling you your great
because of your high position.
And so Mike washed the dishes as a discipline.
Greatness is about service.
He didn't need to wash the dishes.
He was serving us by coming and giving a talk.
He was serving us by squeezing the time into preparing a talk
around all the other things you have to do
as commander of a naval base.
He was already serving.
But he chose to do the more menial service
because that's a better reminder that greatness is about service.

Greatness is about service because we follow Jesus.
The last verse of our reading is one that we should all have by heart.
I would say it's up there for inclusion
in the top 10 Bible verses for Christians to memorise.
10:45 "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served
but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."
In our reading, this is a motivation verse for our service of others.
We serve others because Jesus served us.
That shows us the right attitude to have.

Here are a couple of consequences of this verse.

#1. Being a Christian is first about Jesus serving you.

Often you hear things like,

"She lives a very Christian life."

Or "He's not a church attender but he lives a very Christian life."

Or "She's not a believer but she lives a very Christian life."

The person saying that

is telling you that the person is a humble servant of others.

And look, there's an element of truth to it on many occasions.

There are non Christians

whose lives often put the lives of many Christians to shame.

Sad but true.

There's an element of truth to it.

But there's also an element of falsehood to it.

A Christian life starts by being a life that is served by Jesus.

The way Jesus serves you is to give his life as a ransom for yours.

And if he has not given his life as a ransom for yours,

then actually you are not living a Christian life.

You may be living a life of service to others.

But unless you allow Jesus to serve you,

you haven't actually made it to first base.

And for many people,

allowing Jesus to serve them is actually harder than serving others.

Serving others makes them feel good.

It's nice to get the positive affirmation

of knowing you've made a difference.

But allowing Jesus to serve you,

well that's a different story.

Jesus serves you by giving his life as a ransom for yours.

To accept that,

you have to acknowledge that you need to have a ransom paid.

No that feels bad.

It's acknowledging, no I'm not good enough.

I can never be good enough.

I can't do it by myself.

I need Jesus.

Lots of people like to feel independent.

If you need Jesus to give his life as a ransom for you,
then you are not independent.

This is incredibly important to understand.

I'm sure all of us know people
who are being kept out of the kingdom of God
because they are too proud to allow Jesus to serve them.
That's one reason why this is a very important verse.

#2. The second reason is because it fundamentally challenges
a worldly view of power and who is important.

You don't have to scratch far beneath the surface
to find that is a constant struggle for the church and Christians
across every age.

The first Archbishop of Melbourne I met was Keith Rayner.

He insisted that all his clergy called him 'Your Grace'.

The Archbishop of Canterbury lives in a palace.

The King lives in Buckingham Palace,

The Archbishop of Canterbury lives in Lambeth Palace.

The current pope gets it.

He refused to live in the palatial residence for the pope in Vatican city
and he made them get him a humble flat.

But the reason people comment on it
is because he's the only one who's ever done it.

Well look it's so easy to find examples that make you wince.

It's shameful.

But it's not just Christian leaders.

All Christians are called to humble service.

All of us need the constant reminder to follow Jesus in this way.

Otherwise we will live according to what is fun for me
rather than what is serving others.

Ask yourself the question each day,
how am I serving others by what I do today?

Remind yourself that following Jesus is following the one who served.