

From Favouritism to Love

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, the Sons of Thunder they were called.



They sound like a couple of hotheads to me – loud, opinionated, self-appointed right and left hand men to the one they hoped would be the Messiah.

Team those two up with impetuous, “foot in the mouth” Peter and you have a real handful. And yet those three were regarded as Jesus’ closest friends, the ones he shared his most intimate moments with. Maybe there’s hope for some of us yet!

This incident with James and John and the discussion that took place afterwards must have made a huge impression on the disciples because it stays in the collective memory of the followers and appears in one form or another in all three of the synoptic gospels.

Just imagine the scene. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. The turn in his ministry has happened. The disciples are aware that some sort of showdown is going to happen, but they are not sure what. The conflicts between Jesus and the authorities, both Roman and Jewish are coming to a head. Will God intervene and declare Jesus as Messiah? I think that is what Peter, James and John were hoping.

So, James and John come to Jesus with their mother, who does the asking.

Jesus – look at my boys. They have been your loyal supporters and friends right from the beginning. We know they are your favourites. Why don’t you reward them by making them your chief deputies, when you come into your kingdom.

Was it really such an odd request? The Roman Empire functioned almost entirely on patronage. There was a pecking order in the society that started at the top with the Emperor and finished at the bottom with the newest slave. Everybody had a place – you owed your place to the patron above you and made sure that the people below you in the pecking order knew that they owed you.

What the boy’s mother was trying to do was to get her boys into a good safe job and secure their future. Isn’t that every mother’s dream?

But they had no idea, these three. Do you really think you can go through all that I will be going through, Jesus asks them? You will, whether you like it or not, but in the Kingdom of God there will be no favouritism, no patronage. God alone is in control. Not you, not me.

But of course, when the other disciples heard about their request, it was like throwing a match into a firecracker box. Sparks everywhere. So Jesus has to sit them down and give them another Kingdom lesson.

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.

Well, of course they knew – and so did the readers of Matthew’s gospel when it was written 50 years or so later. Roman rule everywhere. oppressive, greedy, the army in firm control. And before the Romans, Israel had suffered under the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians. They knew all about power and pecking orders. That’s just the way it was. Even the ancient Hebrew kings had been fond of power. Nothing has changed in the last 2000 years.

But it will not be so among you.

Right.....

but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.

Does that mean that if I want to be great, I have to start at the bottom as a servant and work my way up?

Or does it mean I should act very humble like a slave until people notice me and bring me further up the ladder. But what if they don’t notice me, will I be stuck at the bottom?

Isn’t this just reversing the pecking order – a different method of finding our way to the top? I can’t help thinking about that Charles Dickens character Uriah Heep, who was “ever so humble” and so proud of it!

I’m wondering if any of the other gospel accounts can throw any light on what Jesus was teaching.

Mark’s account is very similar to Matthew’s, but it is when we get to Luke that we see something different. Luke doesn’t tell the story of James and John but writes about a dispute around who is the greatest among them and sets the argument as happening at the last supper.

But he said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

‘You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom...
Luke 22:24-28

For Luke, the problem wasn’t about wanting to become great, but about people who are already leaders and how they handle that power and responsibility. The truly great people ignore their power and authority and act in a way that serves others.

And here Jesus introduces the idea of the table. Yes, in this world the important ones sit at the table and the unimportant ones serve them. But in God’s kingdom, under God’s rule, everyone sits at the table and everyone serves one another.

There are no favourites – and there are no servants.

There cannot be a pecking order around God’s table. Everyone is equal.

I wonder if Matthew was writing to a community where people were jostling for positions of power and influence?

And Luke was writing to a community that had leaders who were a bit too concerned about their own importance?

Greatness in the kingdom of God is not earned. There is nothing we can do to make ourselves great. There is no action by which we can make ourselves important.

Nor does greatness, honour, depend on being up high in the pecking order. In fact, the very opposite. In the Kingdom of God, no position or rank can confer greatness upon us.

Instead, we grant "greatness", importance, to one another. When we serve, we make the other person important.

And why do we serve? Out of gratitude – to God, to Life, to those who love us. To our brothers and sisters around the table.

And if we are equals around this table, then we must also allow others to serve us. We would much prefer to be seen serving others than receiving the service of others. We feel at a disadvantage. But those who cannot lovingly receive the service of others cannot become great.

As we journey along with Jesus and the disciples this Lenten season may we begin to let go of the need to be somebody, let go of the need to prove ourselves, to do our bit, to strive to improve – that terrible Protestant work ethic – and learn to relax – to see a need and fill it, to offer a hand or a shoulder, to take up a task not because you feel obliged to but because you see it as a chance so show love and gratitude.

And be prepared to be served by others – or not; be thanked – or not; be rewarded – or not.

God loves us. No favourites, no strings attached. We love others – as and how we can.

Stumbling, imperfect, often unwilling, but Love's servants, just the same.