

“JOCKEYING FOR POSITION”
Mark 10:31-45

We called him Horse because of his uncanny facial resemblance to such a beast. And Horse liked his pint of best bitter. In fact, he seemed to do little else in his free time other than drink. In the evening, when we were at University, after dinner and the usual token attempt at some work in preparation for the next day's seminars, we would set off down the footpath from our hall of residence towards "The Happy Man" or "The Beehive" or, if it was a fine evening and there was cricket on the green, "The Barley Mow". Horse always led the way, striding purposefully out in front, and as we got closer and closer to our inevitable destination, his speed would increase to the point where he was almost running – as if he could hear the hops quietly calling out to him on the evening breeze. Anyone passing us on the path would have seen this little group of between six and ten students trying to keep up with the single-minded Horse, striding towards his destiny in the public bar.

Hold that image in your mind while I read v32 from *Mark 10* once again. Here's Jesus, striding towards his destiny in Jerusalem. It's a destiny that is infinitely more important than a pint of Mr Courage's best ale, and Jesus is infinitely more focussed on it than Horse could ever have been. You see, Jesus has been following this path not just since dinner time but since before the beginning of time itself. And those who are with him can see that this is no quick dash to the pub. Something is going on here that they can't quite explain. It's something Mark can't quite explain either – even some years after the event as he tries to write it down, when he has had time to reflect on it all.

And so he writes that Jesus' disciples were "*astonished*". They recognised in the steely determination of his step and the eerie focus of his eyes that something was up, that this wasn't just a ramble through the cornfields. And the wider group of followers who were with them – very probably pilgrims from the north going up to Jerusalem for the Passover celebrations – they were actually "*afraid*". The atmosphere was electric. Jesus' determination was awesome. What was going on?

The disciples have now been with Jesus for three years. They have heard him preach and teach and debate and discuss. They've watched him as he has healed the sick and forgiven the sinners, as he has faced down demons and restored dignity to the outcasts, as he has challenged the establishment and exposed the vested interests of the doorkeepers of doctrine and decorum. They have caught glimpses of the wonderful Kingdom of God that Jesus has been proclaiming. And they have heard him twice now talking about his destiny of suffering and death. But this purposeful march towards Jerusalem – the royal city, the focus of their Jewish faith and identity – this surprises even them.

And Jesus seems to sense this, so he takes them aside and explains to them once again what is going to happen. In vv33,34 Jesus gives them the most explicit description yet of the fate that awaits him when they arrive at their Holy City. He will be betrayed and condemned in a conspiracy between his own race and their oppressors. They will mock him, flog him and kill him. But he will be back. The passion of the Christ, the great theme of the gospels, of the Bible, of all Christian theology. It's gruesome and it's awesome. (If you want to know just how gruesome and awesome, then pluck up your courage and go to see Mel Gibson's soon to be released film.) And in v45, Jesus tells them **why** this is going to happen (something which the film does not do, as it happens) – he will "*give his life as a ransom for many*". Jesus' death is going to bring release for those imprisoned by the consequences of sin and evil.

But in amongst these statements of cosmic significance, Jesus once again has to deal with the down-to-earth reality of his followers' own inability to grasp what this Kingdom life is all about. As he talks of salvation for humanity and the priorities of the Messiah, his closest friends are still squabbling about their own status within the Kingdom. As one commentator writes (Graham Swift in *NBCR*), "*Nothing could better illustrate the danger of having a mind preoccupied with petty thoughts of self at a time when big things are happening in the spiritual realm.*" James and John, who some argue are the cousins of Jesus and so

believe themselves to be in a privileged position, want to ask a favour of Jesus. They want special rank in the new Kingdom. And Jesus has to put them right again. “Do they never listen?” we find ourselves asking. Well, do you? Have you done anything about what you’ve heard in Mark’s gospel so far. Probably not.

But Jesus patiently explains yet again that the way the Kingdom works isn’t the same as the way the world works at present. He’s already told them that in v31, at the end of the last section – “*Many who are first will be last, and the last first.*” And now he points out that those who are serious about the Kingdom need to be **subordinate**, ready to **suffer**, and eager to **serve**. What does that mean for us, then?

1. **BE SUBORDINATE – DON’T SEEK STATUS**

You can see why James and John make the request that they do, can’t you? They seem to be part of the inner circle of Jesus’ closest friends (along with Simon Peter). And they probably think that the decision to go to Jerusalem is in order that Jesus can reveal himself there as the long-awaited Messiah when the Jewish people gather for their holiest festival, Passover. So they ask to be allowed to sit on either side of him when he is acclaimed as the true Messiah. Those were the two most privileged positions in relation to the leader. The person sitting on his right was second in command and the one on his left, the third most important. (We are given no clue as to how James and John would settle that order of priority!)

Once again, they are looking for status, for a position where everyone would see and, they hope, acclaim them. They want to be at the very centre of attention and to be the top dogs along with Jesus. But the Kingdom is not about that. There are no places of high rank – at least, not that are earned by anyone. It’s all to do with God’s grace: even Jesus cannot grant those kinds of privilege. You wouldn’t think it, though would you? Not when you look at the church that bears Christ’s name. There are always people who want to be seen, to be noticed, to have some kind of status acknowledged. It’s perhaps an interesting issue to ponder as we consider all those people who are going to be involved in doing things in the life of this particular church at our AGM shortly. Why are you doing what you’re doing? So you can further the purposes of the Kingdom of God, or so that people will see your name on the list and notice you week by week? Are you prepared to subordinate yourself to the purposes of the Kingdom of God, or are you seeking status in the eyes of others? Reflect on that in your own situation – both here in church and elsewhere, where the temptation to seek a bit of status might be even stronger.

James and John wanted to end up in Jerusalem on the right and left of Jesus. They had no idea what was really going to happen when they arrived there. We know – and, although we’ve tried hard to read this story so far as if we don’t know the ending, we can reflect on the irony of what really happened. Who did Jesus find on his right and left as he accomplished his destiny? That’s what leads into his next point.

2. **BE PREPARED TO SUFFER – DON’T SEEK SAFETY**

After they’ve made their request, Jesus seems almost dismissive. “*You don’t know what you’re talking about,*” he says. And they don’t. They have no idea, as we’ve said, about the implications of their request. And Jesus takes a couple of images from the Old Testament to challenge them. Can they “*drink the same cup*” or “*be baptised with the baptism*” that Jesus must? Both those metaphors are very firmly linked with the idea of disaster. Are they prepared to go through what Jesus will have to go through? They say that they can, but they have no idea of what lies in store for Jesus. Even though he has told them shortly before this, they clearly have no real sense of the implications – if they did, they wouldn’t be so preoccupied with their own status and safety. As it happens, says Jesus, they will both suffer: and both were martyred for their faith eventually.

But those who follow Jesus should not do so expecting a safe and trouble-free passage through life. The life of the Kingdom of God is a life of risk and adventure. It's not for those who just want to sit out their days in comfort – a routine that chugs along very nicely during the week as your footsteps fall in with those of the world around and is disturbed only superficially on Sunday as you take your usual place in church for a few minutes. It's for those who want to take Jesus at his word, who want to march to the alien beat of a very different drum, who want to involve themselves with the risky, radical activity of the community of the gospel, who are prepared to speak out and go against the flow when occasion demands.

We have been looking at the letter of Peter at the Bible study on Tuesday nights and our discussions have been focussed very much on Peter's contention that the follower of Jesus, the citizen of the Kingdom of God, should accept suffering *for Christ* as normal. And each week we have said, with a certain sense of relief, that we don't actually have to suffer very much for Christ in our part of the world. That may well be because we haven't learned to take the responsibility of serving Christ very seriously yet., because our words and actions and attitudes are so influenced by our own desire for safety and for keeping in with the world's values that we don't speak out as we should, we don't live lives that are radically and noticeably distinctive for Christ. Don't you think that this Kingdom of God which Jesus has modelled and described, just in what we've read of Mark's book so far, is so wonderful that we should be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for it? Those Christians who squabble and bicker and manoeuvre for position within the church, who just want everyone to notice them, who are so desperately anxious about their status have really lost the plot. That's not being a follower of Christ: that's being a follower of the world, but trying to do it in church.

3. SERVE – DON'T SEEK SUPERIORITY

Status is all about what other people **think** of you, where you can position yourself in the pecking order. Superiority is all about what other people **do** for you, about getting other people to serve your needs because of your status. James and John must have made their request to Jesus in private: perhaps they took him aside for a few moments. But the other ten soon get wind of what's going on and they are not impressed! The knives are out. "What do they think they're doing? Why should they have any privilege? Why haven't we been included? Surely we're the ones who should all be granted special privileges."

So Jesus has to get in amongst them as they snipe at each other. This is not what the Kingdom's about. He points out the radical otherness of it. It doesn't work along the lines you've been used to – the ways in which the world at large operates. In this Kingdom the lowest are given priority. What the world celebrates as achievement – intellect, wealth, influence, power, status – counts for nothing here. This is all about grace and about service. You see, in the world, the further we rise up the heap, the more we expect to be done for us. (And, perversely, some think that the further down the heap they are the more right they have to be served by others.) But Jesus says that this isn't about what others can do for you, but what you can do for them. There's a great sentence at the beginning of v43 that we maybe ought to have written above the door of the church as we leave: "*Not so with you.*" This community of the gospel, this expression of the Kingdom of God is different, radically different.

The leaders in the world "*lord it*" over the rest. Leaders in the church – ministers, elders, people on the rotas, whatever – serve others (at least, that's what should happen!). In the church, authority should come not from your name being on a rota or a list or whatever, but from the evidence of a life lived wholly for God, and it's not an authority of superiority, but an authority of integrity and authenticity. In other words, people should be able to see by the way you live your life, by your attitudes and words and actions, that you are deadly serious about Jesus, and then they will take you seriously. We're not talking about authority as power, but authority as respect.

Now, for those of us – all of us here today, I guess – who have been through our education system and have spent years working in our culture, we have learned that the way to progress is upwards and we should always be trying to better ourselves by forcing our way up the pecking order. In the Kingdom of God it's pretty well the opposite. Progress is downwards (in the way we traditionally look at it) as we become increasingly used to the role of servant, giving up privilege and power, status and superiority to the point where all we have left to give up is our life.

And that's what Jesus did. He gave up his life – for you, for me. He demonstrated humility to the ultimate extent, providing us not only with the model for our Christian lives, but also, as we have said so many times, the motivation. Jesus gave up everything for you. How will you respond? Seeking status and safety and superiority? Or serving, suffering, subordinating yourself to the will of God?

Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think those with Jesus were “*astonished*” and “*afraid*”?
2. In what ways do we make demands like that of James and John?
3. Can you think of any people (from the present or the past) who have become great by being servants? What impresses you about them?
4. In what ways can the Church model this kind of servant attitude? What could **you** do personally?
5. What does Jesus mean by the phrase “*gave his life as a ransom*”?
6. Is there anything in this passage that has had a particular impact on you or anything new that you have learned from it?