That passage from St Mark we have just heard is probably very familiar to you, but I wonder if it has ever struck you just how strange that request which James and John make really is. For a start, it seems to come out of nowhere. Jesus and the disciples are making their way towards Jerusalem after the Transfiguration, and Jesus has just given the last of three prophecies about his coming suffering and death. As soon as he finishes, James and John come forward and ask this favour: “Allow us to sit at your right and your left in your glory”; at first sight, it is as though they have not been listening at all to what he has been saying. Jesus foretells his death, and all they can worry about is status; Jesus speaks of his coming passion, and all they are thinking of is having the “seats of honour”. As is so common in Mark’s gospel, the Twelve seem pretty thick, almost utterly boneheaded in the face of Jesus’ teaching.

Strange, too, is Jesus’ response to their request. One might expect him to express frustration or even anger with the brothers – as he does elsewhere in Mark, and indeed as the other ten apostles do when they hear what has been said. One might expect him to condemn the arrogance of such a request, for it is a very great favour they are asking. In Matthew’s version it is their mother and not James and John who asks this favour – as if the “pushy” Jewish matriarch making such a bare-faced claim for power might spare the apostles’ blushes. Yet Jesus does none of these things. Instead, like any good rabbi, he gently turns the question back on them, to see if they really understand what they are asking. “Can you drink my cup of suffering?” he asks; “can you be baptised in my baptism?” Clueless as to what he is really saying they swear they can, and only then does he “pull the rug” from under them by saying that seats at his right and left are not his to grant. Then, in what seems like a last-ditch attempt to pull the group back together and explain his vision of his Messiahship, he gives that beautiful teaching on Christian leadership – that the greatest is the one who is slave of all – summing up in those famous words: For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk.10:45) – a vision which fulfils the great prophecy of Isaiah which we heard in our first reading.

Yet I think there is another way we can see that seemingly arrogant request of the sons of Zebedee, another way that we can read their thoughts, and a way which, perhaps, explains why Jesus is so gentle – though demanding – in his reply. For I think that, in some sense, this dialogue with Jesus represents for the discipleship of James and John what the dialogue between Jesus and Peter at Caesarea Philippi meant for their relationship. What do I mean by that? Well, perhaps it seems almost trivial to note that they would not have made that request unless they believed that Jesus was indeed going to sit enthroned in the coming Kingdom. They would not have bothered asking for a share in his glory, unless they truly believed that there would be a glory to share. OK, their request is still pretty dumb, what they ask for is probably from a host of mixed motives – and, given
Jesus’ response – clearly more to do with status and “being special” than anything else. Nonetheless, they are asking from a position of deep faith, a position of deep belief in the power of the friend they see before them – otherwise they would never even have asked him at all. And perhaps that’s why Jesus does not condemn them outright, why he gently explores with them what their request actually means. Jesus recognises that they – James and John – have glimpsed something of what is to come, something of who he is – just as Peter had before them – and that their daring was somehow rooted in faith and in love.

So why is that important? Well, perhaps a brief reminiscence might illustrate the point. Some years ago, at the beginning of my vocations work for the community, I worked closely with our community psychologist. A religious priest himself, he acted as my “mentor” for a year, while I started to come to terms with my new role and its emotional demands. Midway through one of our sessions, he asked me the most difficult question I think I have ever been asked. It was a simple question: “What do you really want from God?” I was utterly shocked, appalled and confused by that question, despite its simplicity. Until then, possibly stupidly, I don’t think I had ever even thought of things in those terms. Surely that question was all about selfishness, about putting myself in the centre; surely that couldn’t be the right question to ask? Indeed, for me, the “big” question had always been almost the polar opposite: “What does God want from me?” – a question I have wrestled with my whole life. I couldn’t immediately frame an answer to that question he posed, yet, after years of reflection, I think it is an important question for all of us, a question which echoes that of James and John: What do we really want from God?

I suspect that, for most of us for most of the time, we are not as daring as James and John in our requests in prayer. I suspect we probably pray for the little things – a little peace, a little rest, a little joy, a little companionship, a little success, enough food and enough warmth, perhaps even for a little more grace and strength. Perhaps, if we do pray for the “bigger” things – for healing, for life, for deep forgiveness – we may be more comfortable praying for those things for others than for ourselves. And so, perhaps the example of James and John may help us too be just that little bit more daring in our prayer. It may be that we, like them, may ask with “mixed motives” – but then perhaps too, Jesus may be as gentle with us as he was with them, gently questioning if we are sure about what we ask, gently exploring if we realise the cost, perhaps even – as he did with them – gently disappointing us, only to find another way of giving us what we actually need, rather than what we want.

Ultimately, I know in my heart of hearts that the answer to that question my friend posed: What do you really want from God? is, for me at least, nothing less than God himself – even if I also know that I do not yet have the strength to receive that gift in its fullness. And yet, here and now, in this Eucharist that is precisely what he gives us – nothing less than his own self in bread and wine, all life and all goodness to be our life. At each and every Mass, we dare to say “Our Father” to the One who – already – has spared himself nothing for our good, even His Only Son; what will we dare to ask of him today?

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