

**Pentecost 20**  
**18/10/2009**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Job 38:1-11, 34-41**

**Psalm 104**

**Hebrews 5:1-10**

**Mark 10:35-45**

**...it shall not be so among you...**

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Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, regarded by some as the most powerful woman in the world, has many credits to her name. Recently a journalist questioned her leadership style and suggested she performs more like a “Moderator” who leads in a context of consensus. He claimed she does not lead so much as jump on the bandwagon once it is rolling. The use of the term “moderator” prompted some reflection. Was the journalist asking us to recall to two influences in Angela Merkel’s life: she grew up in the heavily socialist environment of East Germany, and she is the daughter of a Lutheran pastor. Both of these have a communal orientation and a tendency to exercise authority through flat structures rather than hierarchies. Does this mean the most powerful woman in the world does not lord it over others, but exercises her wisdom and power communally?

James and John’s request of Jesus for positions of power in leadership and his response provokes the question of what sort of leadership is meant to apply in the Christian community and how is authority to be exercised. Their request was a bit like a blank cheque, but they didn’t understand what they were asking for. Context here is everything: their request came directly after Jesus’ third prediction of his death:

*[Jesus] ...took the twelve aside and said what was going to happen to him. “... we are going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days rise again.” (vs 33 – 34)*

Whereas James and John think glory is on its way and their quest for power aroused hostility amongst their colleagues, Gethsemane and Calvary are just ahead, where self-interested motives and the search for grandiosity are profoundly challenged. James and John don’t get it and compared with the outcasts and women who were able to grasp Jesus’ message and stood by him in his suffering, they have yet to understand what it means to follow him.

*“Are you able to drink the cup I will drink, or be Baptized with my Baptism?”* Jesus asked. Baptism refers to the whole story of his life lived in solidarity with humanity as self-giving service and praise of God. The cup refers to the dramatic suffering that is come. Jesus can grant a share in his life, and his suffering, and we are called to share those things. But compared with the world at large in which leadership positions with power and privilege can be transferred executively, no such option applies here. The disciples are called to live by the rules of self-giving, to serve and not dominate, to suffer for and with the least. Such positions as they may be granted arise as gifts from within their involvement with Jesus, who one person describes as being on a mission of “self-expanding love”. And when Jesus came into his kingdom he did not choose those who were on his right and left, the irony was two thieves hung with him there.

*“It shall not be so among you.”* These words rule out tyranny, but they do not rule out the need for authority to be exercised in the church. Nor do they reveal a preference for a particular form of church order or polity. *“It shall not be so among you”* means there is to be no “politics as usual” among the people of God. *“It shall not be so among you”* means power will be exercised in the Christian community, whether by bishops, ministers, elders or popes or people, according to a certain style measured by the cross. There we see humility that gave itself to suffer even death for the liberation of others. The cross of Christ presents a serious challenge to secular understandings of power.

As you know I have been a church bureaucrat and I did management study. It was necessary to understand the way things work, and the expectations that go with administration. But what was vital in a church role was to bring the values of the gospel to the processes and the decisions on a day-to-day basis, and to confront one’s own prejudices and faults. Without such a discipline there is little chance people will see the difference between the way the church does business compared with the world.

Those of you who follow the work of Don Watson, who writes about the way management speak and management mentality continues to expand, know that he is protesting about something more than words. He is pointing out to us that if we lose the words that have been part of the stories that have shaped us, we are losing our culture and descending into a grey and lifeless world without colour and meaningful reference points. Recently he gave examples of how this trend has even crept into the church, and if we aren’t already, we should be on red alert over this. The loss of our language, church though it may be, involves much more than that. It means the loss of our peculiar understanding of order and polity, and ultimately leaves us vulnerable to being dominated and directed by something other than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It means the loss of a vision of ourselves as the people of God.

*“It shall not be so amongst you:”* these are words to keep before us. They point away from tyranny towards lives that are willingly lived according to the self-giving revealed in the life and death of Jesus. *“It shall not be so amongst you”* stands for not being driven by the need to dominate others, the search for expanded self-indulgence and grandiosity, or the pursuit of personal agendas before all else. *“It shall not be so amongst you”* means living in a way that is led by the Gospel and allows God to be God. It means when power and authority is exercised in the church it will not be dictatorial, coercive, secretive or competitive. Rather, it will have an eye to community life and seek to work in partnership with the people of God. It will be concerned for the little ones, the marginal and the least. It will seek to build up and strengthen rather than stifle the gifts of freedom and life given by the Spirit. And it will always be open to question and reform because here the light of the Gospel is allowed to shine on the exercise of leadership, and our whole life together as people of God.

The question Jesus puts before James and John, and is before us today is: are you willing to drink my cup and share my baptism – to live in the way I am showing you, to serve, not in a self-centred way or to lord it over others? Are you ready for costly service?

In relation to his work in promoting non-violence, Mahatma Ghandi said that success would not finally come through words or arguments won. He said: “It shall be preserved by people living it in their lives with utter disregard for the consequences to themselves”.

This is translatable for us. “Living by the Gospel will not be preserved amongst us through more words alone or arguments won: it shall be preserved by people living it in their lives with utter disregard for the consequences to themselves.”

As we step out today, to a new stage of life together as the people of God in this place, may we choose again to live, not as the pagans do, but as a community that lives by the Gospel, to the glory of God.

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