

Year B | Proper 24 (Trinity 20)

Sunday 17 October 2021 @spdb

Mark 10.34-45

“...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” (v43-4)

James and John want a privileged position in Jesus' new world order. It is a very human request, jockeying with others to clamber to the top of the pile.

'We want you to do whatever we ask of you,' which reminds me of the way we sometimes pray. Just dish out the favours Lord, and make me your top priority.

Jesus tells them they have no idea what they are talking about. In spite of being his disciples, they fail to grasp how mind-bendingly radical the message of Jesus is -- how it turns the values of the world on their head and calls us to adopt a way of being that runs counter to everything we've

been taught about how to get on in the world and be a success.

For Jesus, the whole notion of greatness comes through giving up personal ambition, power or easy living, for the sake of the common good. And, he tells his disciples, that is to be the lot of his followers as well.

Indeed James, one of the disciples who asks Jesus for this special favour, will later be executed for his role as a leader of the church in Jerusalem.

For Jesus, greatness comes through servanthood. To be a slave — the lowest of the low in society. But unlike people who have been forced into slavery against their will, Jesus followers are called to do something even more extraordinary. To choose slavery voluntarily.

I'm mindful that we're considering this during Black History Month, and that there may be some here today with forebears who were forced into slavery.

Nor is slavery a thing of the past. In 2019 there were some 350¹ convictions for modern slavery in this country; women who have been forced into prostitution and domestic servitude, as well as workers in agriculture and factories. The scale of human trafficking and the activities of gang masters is notoriously hard to quantify due to its hidden nature — but it could be as high as 136,000 people in the UK according to the Global Slavery Index.²

Nor has the great injustice of Britain's historic role in the slave trade in Africa, the West Indies, and elsewhere been fully healed. Almost 200 years after the abolition of slavery in Britain and her colonies, there is still much work to do; both to eliminate modern slavery and to come to terms with the legacy of our historic slave trade.

This is painful stuff. I well remember watching the newsreader Moira Stewart, weeping on television over the names of her ancestors listed in a slave register, in an episode of *Who Do You Think You Are?*

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2020-uk-annual-report-on-modern-slavery>

² <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/modernslaveryintheuk/march2020#measuring-modern-slavery>

Slavery was normal in Jesus' time, viewed as part of the natural order of things, as these things are by those with wealth and power who perpetrate oppression on others. Without gas and electricity, slaves and servants were the energy source of the day. His words will have been no less provocative at the time he spoke them than they are to us today.

So his suggestion that we adopt the role of slaves is baffling stuff. What can it mean?

While real slaves long for nothing more than their freedom, Jesus tells us that becoming the servant of others leads to a new kind of freedom.

St Paul, in his letter to the church of Galatia, wrote: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Gal 5.1). The slavery he is talking about is the slavery of self-centredness. A life spent in pursuit of our own advantages, privileges, power and wealth. That is something that

becomes oppressive — not just to the individual but to those around them. The world will be a better place when we learn to properly discover Jesus' idea of freedom. He asks us to give up our own personal gain for the benefit of others, as Jesus gave up himself for us on the cross. He does not seek to force us but leads us to choose this, so that the freedom of the Kingdom of God will be revealed to us. As we look out for the needs of others, and preoccupy ourselves with them, others will look out for us and ensure that we are not in need. This is Jesus' vision of the kind of 'kingdom community' he wants us to help build.

In turn, he is able to confidently assert that we need not worry about food or drink or clothing. His followers will live by a different code, caring for one another and sharing what they have with those most in need.

But this is hard stuff. Like most of us, I am pretty bad at it. I need to be reminded, encouraged, egged on, and inspired by those around me. My prayer life goes some way to sustaining me in this, but I need - as I suspect you do too - others around me to help me do it, show me how it is done,

to spur me on when I am flagging. And that is what the Church is for. To be a community of followers of Jesus who choose to put others before themselves, to love their neighbours. In doing so, Jesus promises us his freedom - the fullness and abundance of life that comes from freely serving others and serving God.

This is a work in progress and, naturally, the Church does not always get it right. But if we commit ourselves to this common enterprise together, we will discover what true greatness means.

Because “...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” (v43-4)

Fraser Dyer