

**21 October, 2018**  
**Mark 10:35-45 and Isaiah 53:4-12**

It's that time of year again. The trees are turning russet, days are shorter, nights are becoming decidedly chilly, and another series of *The Apprentice* has begun on television. Over the next few weeks, an assortment of men and women will try their hand at a given task. Their efforts are assessed by a business tycoon. Each episode ends with some people staying and others being sent home. And those who get through to the end secure an actual apprenticeship and bask in the tycoon's reflected glory.

Now this is of course reality television. It is entirely contrived. But we can't stop watching. And week after week it re-enforces a message: in order to succeed in this life we must model ourselves on the successful tycoon. To have a winning streak, we have to be ambitious, determined, and ruthless, and it doesn't matter too much if this is at the expense of other people.

I think you'll agree that the style of leadership that is modelled by Jesus couldn't be more different. It is spelt out clearly in the gospel of Mark, nowhere more so than in the verses we just had read. So we had better have a look at what is going on. After a hard trek, Jesus and his disciples are on the threshold of Jerusalem. On the way Jesus has been teaching them. They are coming to the end of a long in depth training section on discipleship. It's time the disciples were assessed; it's time for them to show how far they have come to understand Jesus and themselves. There is one thing in particular which they have to understand: Jesus has just told them for the third time how he will soon be betrayed, rejected, killed and how he will then, after three days, rise from the dead. He has told them that clearly in so many words. But do the disciples take it on board? No they don't! They persistently fail to get the point of what he is saying.

True, they have in many ways proved faithful. Take James and John. These two have been with Jesus from the very beginning of his ministry. They left their fishing nets, their home, their family – they left everything to follow Jesus. They have served their apprenticeship. In the time they had with Jesus, James and John were in the inner circle. They listened to his teaching. They had an opportunity to grasp Jesus' vision of the Kingdom, of discipleship, of leadership. But there is only one snag. They are imbued with a reality show mentality. Their minds are set on achieving personal glory above all else. When Jesus comes to glory, haven't they earned a share? when Jesus is acclaimed as the great Messiah, the saviour of the world, haven't they a right to be in his cabinet, sitting back in the front benches beside him, one to his right and one to his left, basking in his power and glory? In their own eyes, they have come to the end of a successful apprenticeship – time now for the rewards. They have earned a share of Jesus's glory, now they are ready to enjoy greatness and status.

James and John have clearly not understood anything that Jesus had been teaching them. Their request has to have been one of the most disappointing moments in Jesus's time with the disciples. Where have the twins been all

this time? Hadn't they seen and heard what was happening? Hadn't they noticed the little child whom Jesus set in their midst, his blessing of a group of children whom they had tried to send away?

James and John have had every opportunity to catch Jesus' vision of God's intentions for the world, and what have they learnt? They want to be rewarded by personal power and glory, and they are trying to twist Jesus's arm to get what they want.

How does Jesus react? We might expect him to be angry, to rebuke them sharply at the very least. But if Jesus is exasperated with them, he doesn't show it; too much is at stake. He responds that they do not know what they are asking; he confronts them with a vision, not of earthly power and glory, but of martyrdom and death, his martyrdom and theirs. Like the servant in Isaiah 53, Jesus will be despised, rejected and finally executed. This is the cup he will drink, this is the baptism with which he is to be baptised. For him, the road to glory runs through the valley of suffering and death – if the disciples are faithful, the same will very probably happen to them.

If Jesus wasn't angry with James and John, the other disciples are. The brothers have jumped the gun; sought assurances on behalf of themselves at the expense of their colleagues. But haven't they as much right as the brothers to share in Jesus's glory? In their indignation, the other disciples are clearly missing the point every bit as much as the twins. The only categories of leadership they have in mind are those they have seen in the Herods of this world, power-hungry, paranoid, control freaks. Jesus again resists rebuke. He cites the secular authorities of the day as an example of how not to exercise leadership. His disciples, his true champions, are to be different. Not for them the prevailing wisdom of the day. Not for them the ruthless mind-set of a tyrant or a business tycoon, bent at whatever cost, on power and glory. They will not trample on other people to get to the top. Their primary criterion has to be service, service of God, service of one another, service of their neighbours, service for the common good. It will entail self-sacrifice, even suffering, but only that way will God's purposes for the world be fulfilled.

What does this look like in my life and yours? What does Jesus's teaching mean for us today?

We may see it symbolically writ large in the person of the Pope. At his inauguration in March 2013 Pope Francis defined his own leadership in terms of radical service with an option for the poor. Not for him the conventional trappings of the papacy, from the fleet of Mercedes cars to the purple shoes. In his ministry, Francis has modeled a focus on service; he takes every opportunity on his trips to visit 'places of pain' – prisons, drug addiction centers, homes for the disabled – and he spends a large part of his time in St. Peter's Square at the Wednesday general audiences with the elderly, the disabled and the homeless. So dramatic has been the impact of Francis's leadership of the Roman Catholic Church that *The Economist* believes the Pope should be studied in Harvard Business School as an example of good

leadership. In 2014, *Fortune* magazine put the Pope in the top spot of its fifty greatest world leaders, for having “electrified the Church and attracted legions of non-Catholic admirers by energetically setting a new direction.” As has been suggested, “these accolades from the high citadels of cultural and economic liberalism are all the more remarkable because they were being awarded to a man whose critiques of western elites, capitalism and individualism were as relentless as they were devastating”.

Francis’s actions, words, and gestures have awoken in western culture a dim, often unconscious, yet powerful memory of someone once loved but since lost. A recent head-line in the *Washington Post*, not known for its religious journalism, went like this: “Like Francis? You’ll love Jesus!”

So how do we followers of our risen Lord behave in a way that reflects the mind of Christ? How do we follow the teaching of Jesus in our homes, in the church, in the classroom, in the boardroom, the doctor’s surgery or the shop floor? They say that all work-places have their fair share of plots, vendettas, and backstabbers, people on the way up and those they’ve trampled on to get there. And I think we will most of us recognise an element of that in our experience. But this issue extends well beyond the working environment. It affects national and international politics. Indeed, it sometimes feels as if politics is office politics writ large. The way of life of entire communities is on the line. The stakes are high. But together we followers of Jesus can make a difference. We will not ride rough-shod over the needs of other people. We will ask insistent questions about the numbers of homeless people on our streets, and the numbers of men, women and children who are compelled to use food banks – and we will do so with determination. We may like the disciples, rarely do or say the right thing, but we will create a community that keeps alive the memory of Jesus’s ministry and in so doing we will testify to the power of God’s redeeming love.

For we are marching in the light of God, following our risen Lord who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

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