**Where would you like to sit? October 17 2021 Mark 10:35-45**

I have never been a daredevil. Cautiousness is hard-wired into my personality. So I struggle to comprehend some of these reality TV shows that have become popular. It astounds me that anyone would put themselves in a position where they would be pressured to do whatever the “host” challenged them to do, to prove their courage, endurance or tenacity, and even more to expose their response on national television!

This group of Jesus followers made the bold request, “We want you to do for us whatever we ask”. I marvel at their audacity! They aren’t small children, trying their hand at manipulating a parent or a friend, these are adults, close followers of Jesus, who have been with him for almost three years. James and John demonstrate an arrogant attitude of entitlement, demanding Jesus grant whatever they wanted. As disciples of Jesus, those learning from Jesus, we could possibly expect that Jesus could say to them, *“I want you to do whatever I ask”,* but not the other way around.

In Mark’s gospel this is the penultimate event prior to Jesus triumphal entry to Jerusalem. This incident comes straight after Jesus third prediction of his imminent suffering and death. In this context it seems even more astounding.

The irony is that despite all that has gone before these disciples are still scheming for positions of privilege. In the previous two chapters they have been present to hear Jesus rebuke to Peter when he misunderstood the path of suffering that lay before Jesus, (8:33) they heard Jesus teaching about teaching about denying yourself, taking up your cross and following him (8:34-37). They heard Jesus words about being last of all and servant of all, (9:35) and three times they heard Jesus prediction of the sufferings that lay ahead for him. (8:31; 9:31, 10:33,34) They experienced Jesus rebuke when they were squabbling over who would be the greatest in God’s kingdom, (9:33) they watched and listened twice as Jesus used the example of the child to illustrate how they should respond with humble openness to God. (9:36-37) Despite having had the example of a child set before them, this example of weakness, vulnerability, openness, trust, and having no status or power, these disciples continue to manipulatively seek privilege, power and status.

Sadly the church through the ages has also actively sought privilege, power and status, and sometimes has effectively used their position to dominate and to exploit. On a smaller scale *“we all know how quickly jealousy breaks out when a small group seems to have acquired a privilege that others could not share or did not know about.”[[1]](#footnote-1)* The reality is that the alluring dynamic of gaining honour, power and status is a significant challenge for followers of Jesus. Exercising self-denial in this area is often a battle.

It is valuable for us also to consider, Where do we want to sit? Next to him at a feast, at his feet, leaning in close to him, perhaps with your head on his lap/shoulder

The repeated struggles of the disciples, such as the one we encounter in today’s reading, remind us of the difficulty of reversing some popular values to those which Jesus promotes. To accept Jesus statements about his suffering and passion requires surrendering ingrained ideas about honour and dishonour, power and weakness.[[2]](#footnote-2) To adopt a servant perspective in our relationships rather than expecting honour from others involves a counter-cultural choice of downward mobility. Instead of adopting a position of power, adopting a position of humility. Instead of seeking prestigious seating, rather sitting at the feet of Jesus.

Henri Nouwen was a Catholic Priest, who worked particularly in the fields of pastoral theology, education and ministry. He spent almost twenty years working for various academic institutions. He authored 39 books which have been translated into up to 30 languages, and over 7 million copies of his books have been sold. He spent his last 10 years working with the Daybreak L’Arche community in Ontario in Canada serving severely intellectually and physically challenged people.

Nouwen “*moved from a prestigious institution to one few had ever heard of, to work not with the nation’s leaders but with society’s rejects.”[[3]](#footnote-3)* In his journal he wrote with characteristic honesty, “*I love Jesus but I do not want to give up my writing plans, travel plans and speaking plans, even when these plans are often more to my glory than to the glory of God.”[[4]](#footnote-4)*

Nouwen recognised the force of the personal drive for recognition, power and status which is fuelled by rampant ambition. “‘The great paradox which Scripture reveals to us is that real and total freedom can only be found through downward mobility. The Word of God came down to us and lived among us as a slave. The divine way is indeed the downward way.’ By moving to Daybreak, Nouwen acted out God’s pattern of downward mobility. It went against all his instincts, he admitted. Leaving a tenured position at an Ivy League school to settle among a community of the mentally challenged made no sense by any modern measure of success.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Nouwen did not fit effortlessly into this new lifestyle. Philip Yancey describes it in this way, “it had been difficult at first, Nouwen admitted. Physical touch, affection and the messiness of caring for an unco-ordinated person did not come easily. But he had learned to love Adam, truly love him. In the process he had learned what it might be like for God to love us – spiritually unco-ordinated, retarded, able to respond with what must seem to God like inarticulate grunts and groans.”[[6]](#footnote-6) He learned to allow the love of God to work within him that he may love Adam.

The key to Nouwen embracing his new lifestyle appears to be his experience of God’s love and allowing that love to permeate his care for Adam. Likewise Jesus ministry was characterised by his love for the people he served. To embrace a servant lifestyle rather than one geared towards gaining recognition and power likewise appears to lie in receiving God’s love for us and investing ourselves in loving those we are called to serve.

In 1 John 3 we read, “*16This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. 17If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? 18Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”*

Committing to loving even those whom we might find ourselves least inclined to love draws us back to God, that we may be flooded with God’s love, and as that love increases so does the desire to serve.

Like followers of Jesus today however, the disciples were often slow learners, ambitious and selfish, nevertheless they continued to follow Jesus.[[7]](#footnote-7) Jesus understood the challenges and did not rebuke John and James for their request, but he tried to help them better understand the implications of their request. He challenges any simplistic self-centred approach to discipleship. Discipleship will be challenging, love and service are costly, so it is perfectly understandable that followers of Jesus will often be stumbling, shaky servants of the Lord.

James and John remind us of our own frailty, our faltering attempts at following Jesus.

They remind us that sitting at the feet of Jesus is the best place for us to sit so that we can learn how to serve God.

James and John highlight how seductive is the drive for power, privilege and status.

They challenge us to consider how we are going in the task of loving even those we are least attracted to. How open are we to receiving God’s love?

James and John remind us that Jesus wants us to be like him, to serve others rather than being served by others.[[8]](#footnote-8)

They remind us that our personal sense of indignation may be a warning sign that we are becoming more focused on how we are being perceived rather than on being prepared to serve Jesus in our circumstances.

They remind us to consider – where do we want to sit – at the top table or at Jesus feet?

1. Pheme Perkins, “The Gospel of Mark: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” in Leander E. Keck et al (Ed.) *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1995) 654 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Perkins, “The Gospel of Mark: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” 654 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Philip Yancey, *Soul Survivor,* (Croydon, Surrey: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003) 284 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Yancey, *Soul Survivor,* (Croydon, Surrey: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003) 284 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Yancey, *Soul Survivor,* (Croydon, Surrey: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003) 298, citing Nouwen’s writing in Sojourners Magazine in 1981. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Yancey, *Soul Survivor,* 301 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lamar Williamson Jr, *Mark: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching,* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 193-194  [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mark 10:45 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)