

Christ Church, Bath

Holy Eucharist

St James the Great

Jeremiah 45.1-5

Acts 11.27-12.2

St Matthew 20.20-28

There's a debate going on in the Church of England at the moment about whether we clergy should continue using our courtesy titles. You know, 'The Reverend' for a deacon or priest; 'Right Reverend' for a bishop and so on.

Medieval clergy were called clerks (that's where the word 'clergy comes from') because, after the fall of the Roman Empire, they were about the only people in Western Europe who could read or write. They were described as 'reverend' clerks because reverence before God what was

expected of them. So a priest (or in some cases a monk or a nun) might be described as 'The Reverend' so and so. Bishops were 'Right Reverend', archbishops 'Most'. (So they should be!) And so on.

The debate going on at the moment is whether these titles set clergy apart in an unhealthy way. Have you ever wondered about the order in church processions like the one which started this morning's service. In ancient Rome, the important people (such as Caesar Augustus) would be at the front of almost all processions. The rear was taken up by the captives, slaves and prisoners due for execution. To illustrate what Jesus meant when he said "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant" (or slave), the church pretty quickly put bishops right at the back of church processions. So at Christ Church, our procession would normally be led by the children in the choir who, in Roman times, had absolutely no status at all. Right at the back comes the priest who will be presiding at the service.

Mind you, it doesn't always work this way. I've been in plenty of diocesan cathedrals when the clergy lining up for processions almost came to blows to make sure they were in what has become the more high status positions at the back. "I'm a canon, so I come behind you, a mere vicar"; that sort of thing.

Not that power-grabs among the clergy and those who should set an example of service is anything new. The first recorded instance occurs in St Luke's Gospel when James and John petition Christ for the best seats in heaven. I've a guess that the church St Matthew was writing for was a bit embarrassed by this incident, so he passes the blame on to mum, which is why in Matthew's account it is 'the mother of the sons of Zebedee' who comes to Jesus with this rather ignoble request. We might reflect that it's taken nearly two thousand years to get rid of that sort of gender discrimination, and we're not there yet.

No wonder the other ten were angry with the two brothers when they heard this. But don't imagine that their motives were any better (though it would be nice to think they were). St

Luke tells us that the conversation around the table at the Last Supper was ‘which one was the greatest’. In other words, which of the Twelve was going to take power over the Jesus movement after the Lord’s death, which he’d just foretold.

Anyway, had Jesus thought the other ten’s motives were pure I don’t think he would have needed to call them together, and point out the difference between what secular (‘Gentile’) rulers did and how his followers should be. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” he reminded them.

Speaking for myself, my guess is that all clergy (just like anyone who enjoys a position of authority) know these temptations. You start being addressed as ‘The Reverend’ in the Church of England when you are ordained deacon and you put on the clerical collar for the first time (another convention, no more). My first few days in the collar I was terribly embarrassed and self-conscious. As I went out parish visiting for the first time I thought everyone would be staring at me

in the street (they weren't). Later on, I confess that I've enjoyed the status that the collar and the appellation afford me. I might be invited to a wedding reception and be asked to sit at the top table. Nice! I don't think this would happen today (because the church, probably quite rightly, is no longer held in such respect), but forty years ago sales staff never asked me to back my cheques with the bank card number; and bus conductors on late night buses would refuse to accept my fare. You can see how corrupting this sort of deference can be.

I've also seen how hierarchy, at its best, can work at senior levels in the church. In the 1980s I had the good fortune (and privilege) to chaplain the then Bishop of Manchester. I always addressed him formally: 'Bishop'. It was only after he had retired that I dared call him 'Stanley'. But Stanley Booth-Clibborn understood all too well the temptations of high office in the church, and he had a number of strategies to counter them. Although entitled to claim expenses for doing so, he refused to travel by first-class rail. He deliberately chose a down-market model for his official car. To remind himself not to take himself too

seriously he had a tongue-in-cheek cartoon pinned to a board by his desk. Two tramps are walking down the street, one in rags, the other wearing a cope and mitre. The second tramp is telling his friend “It’s not everyone who gives you the coat off his back!”

But back to this morning’s gospel reading and St James. A few weeks or months (we don’t exactly know) after James and John (or their mother) begged Jesus for the best seats in heaven, Jesus was arrested, and gave his life as a ransom for many. It wasn’t too long before the church, reflecting on what had taken place that day, came to understand the Crucifixion as the high point of Christ’s ministry. St John describes this calamity as Christ ‘being lifted up’. For him, Good Friday and Easter Day are two sides of the same coin. He was raised high on the Cross by the soldiers; he was raised up to life on the third day.

But who were at Christ’s right hand and left hand when he was lifted up on Good Friday? I bet you that James and John were thanking their lucky stars it wasn’t them.

We don't know any more about James' martyrdom except what St Luke tells us in this morning's reading from Acts. My guess is it wasn't very nice. Herod orders a raid on a house where it was known the followers of Jesus were meeting or lived. The police arrest James because he's one of the leaders. We can easily imagine the rest. It goes on all too often in today's world.

Whether Barnabas or Saul knew this before they headed down to Jerusalem from Antioch with the famine relief collected by the Christians in Antioch we're not told. But they knew the risks. Saul had been one of the church's persecutors, after all. But by now, Christians knew what discipleship meant. The teaching of Christ we've heard this morning had been taken to heart.