

- *What is your experience of leadership in the church? Do you agree with the observations I have made in this study about leadership in today's church? How do we go about changing things for the better?*
- *Pray for the leaders you have in your church, and talk to them about their own understanding of their roles. If possible, and only if it does not threaten, discuss with them what 'service' means for them and for the church, as they see it.*

Final Prayer

All glory to You, God of laughter and smiles, of conversation and happiness. Bless us now in the good things of life, and may we radiate the happiness of those who are at peace with themselves and with You. May we declare with every part of our being that You are the One who 'makes the difference' to our lives! Thank You Lord God: AMEN.

Prayer

Save us, Lord, from the evils which are present all around us within this troubled world in which we live. Take our eyes away from the world's difficulties, and give us a sight of all the good You are doing around us. Strengthen us to live victoriously in the light of Your love, and give us the courage to fight all evil and yet rejoice in You; through Your name, Lord Jesus Christ, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Rural life

Pray for the farming communities in your country. If you do not know much about them, check out a local paper. Pray for the many different businesses in the farming community.

On-going prayers

- *Give thanks to God for water and how it sustains life*
- *Pray for people who are struggling to maintain a living*
- *Pray for the efforts made in your country to help the economy*

Meditation

Dear Jesus, Saviour, all around us, people suffer dreadfully;
You know how to overcome all the suffering in the world,
So bless us with Your action, presence and power.

Lord God Almighty; all around us the world is in decay;
You hold the mystery of life in the palm of Your hand,
So show us how we should save our planet, even now.

Comforter divine; there is sickness in the souls of so many;
You alone can transform the lives of the broken hearted,
So come to us to heal and liberate the sinners and the sick.

Holy Spirit of peace, breathe through the world's brokenness;
You have the answers to all our troubles and distress,
So break through the pain with Your presence and love.

Father God, majestic Lord of all; show Yourself. We need You.

Bible Study - Matthew 20:20-28

²⁰ *Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons, and kneeling in front of him, asked something of him.* ²¹ *He said to her, 'What do you want?' She said to him, 'Let these two sons of mine sit one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.'* ²² *'You do not know what you are asking!' Jesus then said, 'Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?' They said to him, 'We are.'* ²³ *He said to them, 'You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant. It is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.'*

²⁴ *When the ten heard of it, they were angry with the two brothers.* ²⁵ *But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles like*

to demonstrate authority over their subjects, and their great leaders are tyrants over them. ²⁶ It must not be so with you. Anyone of you who wants to be great must be your servant, ²⁷ and anyone who wants to be your leader must be your slave; ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

Review

After all the recent teaching they had received, it is quite extraordinary that as Jesus travelled to Jerusalem, the disciples squabbled over their places in the Kingdom of Heaven! Previously, Jesus had told Peter that all those who had given up 'house or family' and travelled with Him would 'sit on thrones' (19:28,29), and He had been even handed when saying this to avoid any favouritism. In addition, Jesus taught the disciples earlier about the importance of service (12:15, 16:25) and he had also told them that the least (a child) would be greatest in the Kingdom and that they would have to 'become like children' in order to enter it (18:1-5). Our passage today shows us how hard the disciples found it to put together all this teaching and apply it to themselves!

Jesus and the Sons of Zebedee The mother of James and John approached Jesus, but who was she? By working through several passages of scripture, (Matt 27:56, Mark 15:40, John 19:25) it is possible to work out that she may have been Jesus' mother's sister, named Salome, which makes her Jesus' aunt, and also makes James and John His cousins. Was this a request that James and John, hoping 'family' might have preference over the others? Salome came and knelt before Jesus worshipfully; but her request was clearly a form of manoeuvring. In a patriarchal society, the only major influence that a woman would have would be through her sons, so her request was probably as much for herself as for her sons. She asked, in effect, for a blank cheque of power and authority for her sons in the coming reign of God, and security for herself.

Jesus did not turn to Salome in reply, but to the disciples James and John. He said 'you do not know what you are asking'. They had not grasped the spiritual truths of the Kingdom, so Jesus challenged them with a strange question 'are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?' It is doubtful that the disciples knew what they were saying when they replied, 'we are' (20:22). Did this response may indicate ignorant bravado, or had they really accepted that they had to accompany Jesus all the way to death? (20:17-19). There is real way to tell, and all we know is that when Jesus did die, they fled the scene (26:56); however the fact that they did so meant that the Roman authorities did not kill them with Jesus, as was their normal practice with any group of dissidents! By God's grace and mercy, they survived to pass on this story and its teaching!

The cup of suffering When Jesus prophesied to the two disciples that they would indeed drink His 'cup', He may not have meant that they would die in the same way as He did. In scripture, the 'cup' is a symbol of being overtaken with disaster (Ps 75:9; Is 51:17,22; Jer 25:15 etc), and this is how it is best understood, for we know that Jesus' 'cup' was to fulfil the will of God in His suffering and death (26:39). In the end, John's 'cup' was to follow His Lord until death, probably of old age in exile on Patmos (according to Irenaeus, writing around 180 AD). James, however, died at the hands of Herod (by the sword) an event which deeply affected the early church (Acts 12:2). Each endured a different suffering, but eventually it was part of their call which has become their testimony to the whole church.

Rulers and tyrants and service There is no doubt as to what the other disciples thought of James and John at the time. They were indignant (20:24). James and John were not the natural leaders of the group, a position already held by Peter (16:18,19). Jesus went on to insist that the Kingdom of Heaven was not to be like this world, where authority,

power and control went hand in hand (20:25), resulting in tyranny and oppression. God's way was different, and Jesus then stated the principle of true service; 'Anyone of you who wants to be great must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be your leader must be your slave.' (20:26,27) This is the only true leadership in the Kingdom, and the church.

Jesus' life – a ransom for many The very last verse of this passage is very important. When Jesus described his life as a 'ransom for many', He spoke in a unique way. The Greek word 'ransom' used by Jesus here has its roots in the ancient idea of paying money for the release of prisoners of war. By the time of Jesus, the word was used loosely about all forms of exchange, and even about offerings made to gods (in a Roman Temple) to release a person from a curse. So what did Jesus mean? Would His death 'buy back' others? Would His death remove the curse of God upon humanity for sin? Did He mean that His life was offered to God in exchange for the life of all other people? We would like to feel that it means all these, and it may well do so. However, the best way to work this out is to use the Old Testament.

The main Old Testament prophecy that points us to the death of Jesus is Isaiah 52:13-53:12, in particular verse 10 which describes the suffering of the Servant (Jesus) as a 'sin offering', or a 'ransom' for the life of God's people. So 'ransom' is therefore linked with the idea of Christ's offering of Himself through death for our sins, by which we are saved. The connection is one which needs to be explored further both in the Old and New Testaments, but there is no doubt that they form the basis of the traditional theology about Jesus' death on the Cross in substitution for our sins. By this we mean that Jesus died both for us and in our place, and the offering of His death releases us from the curse of sin that separates people from God.

Without doubt, although this passage tells a rather sorry story about the disciples, it was prophetic of the lives of both James and John, and it teaches us a great deal about the work of Jesus as the Lord's Servant.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss what you believe Jesus felt during the conversation reported in our text. Do you believe Jesus was sad or happy, fearful or angry?
2. Is verse 25 an all-embracing a set of guidelines for church leadership? What else must be considered?
3. When you say 'Jesus died for me', what do you mean, and how does this match with Jesus' comment that He gave 'His life as a ransom for many'?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Issues like these are very important to me personally. I believe that leadership in the church at every level has been fatally flawed by the attractions of various secular systems with various merits; and the traditional teachings of the Church such as the 'substitutionary' theology of Jesus' death, and the paramount importance of personal and general service have been abandoned for quick and easy alternatives which help people little. I long for the day when the considerable amount of teaching in the Bible about leadership is properly analysed afresh and applied to the teaching of our leaders in theological institutes around the world.

Ideas for discipleship programme