

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

“Do What We Ask!”

This is basically what James and John come and ask of Jesus. They don't get the answer they want. You can see why, at once. There are places in the Fourth Gospel where Jesus addresses his beloved disciples as *my little children*. I think today's Gospel is a place where that usage illuminates their relationship. There is something truly sweet about a little child's transparent plot to trap his parents into doing what he wants. It is so weak, so easy to see through: but he still tries it on. *Do what I'm going to ask you: promise!* Even while we back off from the open cheque he wants, we may be full of love and sympathy. If only the world would always do what we want!

Tell Me What You Want!

Jesus is just as cautious. *Tell me first!* - and, of course, what they ask is wrong-headed from beginning to end. It's wrong because of their ignorance of his true destiny. We can't come to Christ for any vain or selfish reason; indeed, on this journey to the Cross, we can't come with him at all. He is going alone, because we will never understand what it's all about, and he will not take us with him as mindless victims. It isn't that James and John don't *deserve* “places at my right hand and my left”; the truth is that there are no places of honour on Mount Calvary. To want the *honour* of going to the Cross with him, therefore, is a senseless request. You'd have to want *dishonour* to make any sense, and they haven't enough insight into his purpose to want that.

“My Dearest Wish Would Be....”

We use sententious language like that when we refer to visions or hopes that we can't fault, our best ideas. How could God not want to fulfil them? A cynical line goes: *Make God laugh: tell him your plans!* But let's not be cynical: let's be brutally honest. Most of my ideas have a large grain of selfishness in them. I can't help it: what d'you want: I'm only human! If by some nightmare scenario the Almighty decided one day to take orders from me, “my best ideas” would probably dish the whole Universe. So it's only realistic for us to top and tail our prayers with the great and humble words, *if it be your will*; and when our understanding of God grows to full stature, we will almost certainly abandon all petitions, except one: *your will be done*.

Just imagine the peace of mind you would have, if your dearest wish were that the will of God should be done. You would be absolutely sure of having your prayers answered in the end. It is where we cling to prayers which God might *not* intend to grant that we are riding for a fall. And yet *thy will be done* is far from a prayer of resignation; it's the most proactive and positive of all prayers, because the dearest wishes of God for us go far beyond anything we would know how to ask for. So I would like to become like a little child who is so sure of his parents, that he doesn't need to make a list for Santa....he knows that they are already conspiring to give him a present he doesn't even know how to hope for. So when somebody says, *What would you like?* he replies *A SURPRISE!* - and, in my experience, that is usually the least that God will do for us.

James And John

Nevertheless, Jesus has a special love for James and John. They are brothers, and when our friends are brothers, we love not only them, but their love for each other too. Jesus knows that they will grow in wisdom and fidelity as their lives unfold; and here he seems even to promise them a share in his suffering, and the awesome mystery of the Passion, which is yet to unfold for him. So there is a further meditation for us in reading the Gospel today: a sincere pondering of that question, *Can you drink the cup I must drink, or be baptised with the baptism I must undergo?* How could they answer him? They don't know what he is talking about. But they do know that they trust him and want to be near him for the future. How he must have loved them as they simply said, *We can*. Then he explains to all the Twelve how their closeness to him is going to mean a shared humility, and nothing vainglorious or proud. When he tells them they must be servants and slaves to each other, perhaps he reserves a tenderness for their simplicity, their directness, which is so childlike. As a group of absentee fishermen from a lost province of an occupied land, James and John have indeed very little to make them proud or vain. They are already rich in the things of the Kingdom, however: their poverty and humility will fit them to take possession of it.
Fr Philip