

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Beside You In Your Glory

James and John are ambitious. But it is a holy ambition, to want to be near Christ: and I feel sure that they had been with him long enough for a scary space to have been opened around the possible consequences of their request. Even when Jesus refers to his future as a *baptism* (immersion is often a risky idea for beings who breathe) and a cup to be drained (the Bible is full of poisoned chalices) they persist in their desire to be with him. He must have loved them as they stood there, simply and generously sticking to their guns. If there is sympathy in his questioning, there is love in his promise that they shall share the cup and the baptism that awaits him.

Sons of Thunder

Like Peter “the Rock”- whom we know as unreliable and changeable - the two boys have a nickname which is quite likely to be ironic. Were they habitually *thunderous*, or the reverse? I’d love to know. They don’t often sound ungovernably dangerous, except when they offer to “call down fire from heaven” on an inhospitable village. They form, with Peter, the innermost trio about Jesus; and therefore their request doesn’t seem outrageous. The fact that *they don’t know about the Cross* is important; the places they are asking for have been allotted, not to two intimate disciples, but to two raging bandits condemned to the same death. Jesus is not denying them *intimacy* with him, he is denying them the very reverse. In Mark’s Gospel above all, Jesus goes to the Cross unaccompanied by his friends: there is no place there for friends. The “glory” of that sacrifice will be his alone, and the part of his disciples is precisely that they will *abscond*.

The Human Destiny

Human beings do not shine much in the Passion narrative. This must raise in our minds the question of whether we were ever invited to “share his glory” at Calvary. Increasingly, as the Gospels are composed, the realization seems to dawn that disciples were not *invited* to go with him: *You cannot follow me now*, Peter is told, *you will follow me later*. This begs the further question: was Jesus ever *meant* to “succeed” in his earthly ministry, was it ever contemplated that he might preach the Kingdom, and *everyone believe in him*? Or does the plan of God, from the beginning, embrace the Cross as the inevitable remedy, the

necessary terminus of the relationship between God and us? Jesus’ determined prediction of the Cross, whose denial he calls *satanic*, a stumbling-block in the messianic path, seems to say that *it was written that the Christ should suffer, and so enter into his glory*. That destiny *demand*s profane and unbelieving bandits, not faithful disciples, to hang at his right hand and at his left. Truly there are places where our creative notions of sanctity have to be ditched, just as the course of salvation itself often takes alarming swerves away from the path we would have chosen. But the day is long, and the Lord is merciful: *if the vision tarries, wait for it: for it will surely come*. We do, in the fulness of God’s time, come at last to be near the Cross: but on God’s terms, not ours.

Stay Alert

The worrying thing is that the Cross is so undesirable, so unchooseable, in itself. My fear is that when it arrives, I will struggle against it because it is diabolical in its form. It won’t come in any form of glory that I would know, and it’s no use asking that it may. Nor will it bear the label of holiness; it is a curse, a condemnation. Jesus went to it *alone*, because he *alone* knew how to recognize it for what it is. We should be in careful training for its discernment, so that when it appears for us, we will not turn from it in shame or fear. To know it and accept it, we will need to have in us the mind of Christ. I am very sure that I have a long way to go.

I’m sure that Jesus will look on me with love, if I try my best to stay with him, and to trust him as the shadows gather. But part of the Cross, I suspect, will be sheer puzzlement, the realisation that I don’t readily understand the way of God. I believe that Jesus offers us something to hang onto: the cry from the Cross, *Why have you deserted me?* gives us a prayer to say when our understanding frays and springs apart, and our human weakness seems ready to sweep us away. It isn’t human to watch your own dissolution with complete serenity. Part of the Cross is fear, the sweat that falls like drops of blood. Even that can be a discipleship.

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