

Pete Greig tells the story of an art critic who was studying an exquisite painting by the Italian Renaissance master Filippino Lippi. He stood in London's National Gallery gazing at the fifteenth-century depiction of Mary holding the infant Jesus on her lap, with saints Dominic and Jerome kneeling nearby. But the painting troubled him. There could be no doubting Lippi's skill, his use of colour or composition, but the proportions of the picture seemed slightly wrong. The hills in the background seemed exaggerated. The two kneeling saints looked awkward and uncomfortable.

It suddenly occurred to Robert Cummings that the problem might be his. The painting had never been intended for a gallery. Lippi's painting had been commissioned to hang in a place of prayer.

The critic dropped to his knees in the public gallery before the painting. He suddenly saw what generations of art critics had missed. From his new vantage point, Robert Cumming found himself gazing up at a perfectly proportioned piece. The foreground had moved naturally to the background, while the saints seemed settled – their awkwardness, having turned to grace. Mary now looked intently and kindly directly at him as he knelt at her feet between Saints Dominic and Jerome. It was not the perspective of the painting that had been wrong all these years, it was the perspective of the people looking at it. (Quoted by Nicky Gumbell's Bible in One Year 13/7/2020)

I love this story and I think it speaks to our reading, James and John wanted to sit on thrones, Jesus wanted to teach them to live on their knees. (Knees)

Do you understand that being a follower of Jesus requires you to serve, to prefer the needs of others, and to assume the role of a servant, symbolically kneeling before those we lead? **I think this is easier to agree than to enact.** When we are in the middle of a project, middle of a plan, the middle of a process; we need to be willing to pause, to help someone who doesn't understand, to explain, or even alter our plan and be what we would now call 'client centred'. That is servant leadership today.

When we assume our knees, we know that we need to lead in a different way. Can you lead from your knees? At home, at work, in the voluntary sector, the venues that make up our living.

v35 Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask".

I find this question extraordinary, what arrogance, to come to Jesus and say we want you to do whatever we ask! Talk about entitlement, my goodness these lads were amazingly arrogant. The sad truth is that we can all be tempted to treat God like this, like the one we come to when we want something.

I'm sure many of us have come across the verse "*I will do whatever you ask in my name*" John 14.13. 'Can I please have a new pony - in Jesus name?' 'Can I have a new Landover - in Jesus name?' 'Can I be Prime minister – in Jesus name?' The truth of human nature is that we want to use God to achieve our agenda. This is something that we need to be constantly vigilant about, we don't just learn it once when we first come to Christ.

The goal of a Christian life is to pray, 'Lord I want what you want – "Thy will be done", I want to do what you want me to do'. So let us turn around the question of James and John. 'Lord what would you have me do'. I remember a friend telling me of their sense that God was calling them to something new and how they took a 60% pay cut to go to the new thing. Doesn't that turn James and John's question on its head. They left their fishing, but wanted 'anything we ask'.

V36 *“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked.*

I love Jesus response, he doesn't explode, he doesn't agree, in just a gentle way he ask what is it that you want. Jesus was an acute observer of people, so he may have had an inkling of what was coming. When you are living on your knees, you are less likely to respond aggressively to provocation.

Now I want to push this metaphor a little, because living on your knees need not be weak; you can rise up from your knees and respond with power if necessary; but the idea is starting in humility and gentleness. Another example might be speaking with a soft voice. Some of us are gifted with big voices that can fill an arena. But how much better to start with a soft voice.

V37 *“Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”*

Now the context is not given by Mark, but it may be that Jesus had been talking about the disciples judging the tribes of Israel. So it might not be such a strange request; but it is still very clearly a request for the best seat. It is a request for power, to be 'in the in crowd', to get the senior position.

Before the events of Easter James and John were probably not thinking about the second coming, they are thinking about Jesus seizing power and ruling Israel. They were vying for cabinet positions, 'Can I be Minister of Finance' and 'I'd like to be Foreign Minister' – or whatever was considered most powerful. In this context both left and right hand seats are positive positions. You can't fault them for their enthusiasm. But they had failed to understand that with authority comes great responsibility and great pressure.

A year ago I took on the responsibility to Chair a review of our Theological Education and Leadership Training in the Presbyterian Church. I'll admit it was an honour to be chosen, and I believe that I have a particular skill set. But it has involved a great deal of work; and a significant burden of responsibility. Our report is public and we are recommending some significant changes to the way that we train our leaders, to the categories of leadership and to the organisation that provides our leadership training. In fact, I've just started some study leave at BTI (that among other things) I hope will help equip me to best lead this review. I thought it would last for a little over a year; through COVID 19 it's been extended for a further year.

One of our recommendations is the establishment of a new diaconate, Deacons as a second tier of leadership, between elder and minister. In the New Testament Deacon translates as one who serves. Those of you who are older will remember we used to have some fabulous deaconesses, we changed that because at that time the two tiers re-enforced a gender hierarchy, the new model is not gender based at all and will not do that.

V38-40 *“You don't know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”*

“We can,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”

Jesus is amazed at their chutzpah, their gall to not only ask, but when challenged – say yes we are up for this. Jesus used two common metaphors. The cup, is a cup of wrath, or a cup of judgement, it meant going through a trial. On the Mt of Olives, Jesus prayed that he would not have to drink the cup. While related to his death it's not the same things as the Communion Cup.

It's the same with the baptism, it is literally a drowning. Then Jesus warned the brothers that they didn't know what they were asking. Then they replied with bravado, “Yes were up for it”, and then Jesus acknowledged that they would drink of the same cup.

Now this is easy with James as he was martyred by Herod in Acts 12. But the tradition is that John lived out a long life.

The really interesting thing about this anomaly – and there are a few of them in Scripture - is that it doesn't make sense if you take a very literalist view of scripture. But if you take a standard historical view of scripture, (that the bible was written by real people located real in history and God really speaks to us through that) then these little anomalies do something powerful. They testify against harmonisation. They show that no one has gone through the text and got rid of every little discrepancy. They actually testify to the historical nature of this passage. If this account was later fabricated by the gospel writer – then they wouldn't have recorded Jesus saying something that doesn't 100% add up. Now I'm sure Jesus knew what he meant, but the fact that it is a little unclear is great, it's the seal of a genuine historic text. Of course their boast comes to nothing, when Jesus is lifted up he has a criminal on his left and another on his right, James and John aren't asking for those positions.

V 41-2 When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.

Authority in our world is often about privilege, not needing to be told, but now being the one who tells others what to do. It's being Mayor, or being Chairperson, or being leader and the rulers in Jesus time enjoyed their power with lavish palaces and all the good things. Power gives you choices, rank has it's privileges, no longer to sleep on a couch but to stay in a suite. No longer to be afraid for where your next meal is coming from. Jesus could have used the word gloat as he thought about the Roman citizens watching over the gladiators. In Greek teaching happiness was far away from work, the wealthy did not work. And Jesus was exposing a primary human desire to win, so that I can lord it over you. Schadenfreude, to take pleasure in beating you and in your humiliation. Jesus would have known Proverbs 17:5 *Whoever gloats over disaster will not go unpunished.*

V43-4 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

This was the opposite of what the lads were expecting. To serve was for the staff, they were owners, to be a slave was unthinkable. But what Jesus was describing here is at the very heart of modern participatory democracy.

The idea that public leadership is about service, about doing the most good for the greatest number of people. That leaders are appointed to have the interest of those that they govern in the forefront of their minds. That was radical then. It continues to be confronting.

Now it doesn't mean the Bishop always serves the tea. But it does mean the leader preferring the interest of their team. Not always just what the team say they want. I love the idea of a leader coach being someone who makes us do the things we don't want to do, so that we can achieve the things we dream of.

An example of this is that next month we are doing a series called **Spiritual Conversations**, I know many of you might think that's awkward. We find it hard to talk about faith. But I know you all want to bring your friends to Christ. Keith, Cate and I are going to preach this, and we are using a series of resources and one of those is a study we are going to do in small groups straight after church.

In your family, how do you lead? At your workplace, how do you lead? At your village or sports club, have you ever considered standing for the committee? Don't just let the people who like a taste of power stand. Maybe God is calling you to stand up and lead, so that you can serve the best interests of the residents.

V45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jesus didn't come to earth to receive all the glory due to his name he modelled life on his knees so that he could raise you up.

Being and becoming a Christian involves committing your life to Christ, it involves asking Jesus into your heart and mind, and it involves a change of perspective worshipping God, and serving your neighbour. Will you join me on your knees?