



SAFE CHURCH BIBLE STUDY: Leadership, Power and Vulnerability

Bible Passage

Mark 10:35-45

The Request of James and John

³⁵ And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” ³⁶ And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” ³⁷ And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” ³⁸ Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” ³⁹ And they said to him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” ⁴¹ And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. ⁴² And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,[Ⓜ] ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave[Ⓜ] of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Commentary

As we meet Jesus and his disciples in this passage, Jesus is determinedly pressing on towards Jerusalem. The disciples sense that something big and important is about to happen but find it difficult to make sense of Jesus’ repeated predictions about his suffering and death. It’s an outcome that just doesn’t fit with their understanding of Jesus’ mission and ministry. It is unthinkable for them.

Over the centuries, commentators have judged James and John fairly harshly for the conversation that we are considering here. Drawing on the close relationship they share with Jesus, the two brothers are trying secure positions of significance and power for themselves in the new kingdom that they fully believe Jesus will soon establish. They picture themselves as close to Jesus as they can get – one at his right hand and the other at his left.

It's easy to characterise James and John as either ignorant – entirely missing the point of what Jesus has been teaching - or as power-hungry and ambitious, following Jesus for what they could gain by association. The other disciples certainly judged them when they realised what they had asked, but it isn't clear if that's because the disciples realised that they were missing the point, or because they were annoyed that they didn't get in first with the same request.

As we read this story, we have the benefit knowing what happened next. The disciples did not. We know that Jesus was not triumphantly enthroned as king in Jerusalem but rather was betrayed, mocked, whipped, humiliated and killed. The only ones to be elevated on Jesus right and left in the days ahead would be the two bandits crucified alongside him.

It seems that Jesus did have a sense of what he was facing. Jesus sees the path of descent and suffering – the cup he must drink and the baptism he must endure – and asks the brothers if they are willing to go through the same. Their glib answer confirms that they have no idea what he means. They still see only power and prestige while he speaks of vulnerability, obedience and service.

It was not long before this that all the disciples had been arguing together about who was the greatest amongst them (Mark 9:33-37). The problem is, as soon as we are ranking people to decide who is the greatest, we are also deciding who is the least and this is really what everyone wants to avoid. To be the least is to be vulnerable and this is a position we avoid at all costs.

In response to the disciples' jostling for position, Jesus called a small child to stand amongst them (v. 36), and then took the child in his arms. What he says turns their futile striving for position and power upside down: whoever wants to be first must be last, whoever wants to be greatest must be least. He challenges them to welcome and embrace the vulnerable in his name, all those who can do nothing to further their agendas or enhance their standing or power. And perhaps it is also their own unavoidable vulnerability that he is asking them to recognise and embrace.

Once again, in the next chapter of Mark, Jesus rebukes the disciples for imposing a hierarchy of importance in which children were least and could be sent away. He welcomes the children, blesses them and offers them as an example to the disciples: receive the kingdom as one of these.

What is it about young children that is so significant here? Perhaps the fact that they are unashamedly themselves, without needing to compare themselves to others and without needing to dominate. They aren't worried about their place in the bigger scheme of things, their success, or their influence. It's irrelevant. They are simply

curious and ready to explore and learn; getting on with the task at hand with light hearts and good humour.

One other striking thing about small children is that they know they are vulnerable and they know they have a lot to learn. Even while they are testing out their new and unfolding skills, they know their limits and are quick to ask questions and to ask for help, to demand help even. They are not ashamed of their vulnerability and don't try to escape from it.

These stories form the backdrop to Jesus' interaction with the sons of Zebedee. What their apparently self-serving question does for us all though is to create the opportunity for Jesus' to spell out how he sees leadership - leadership in God's worldview. In stark contrast to the leaders of the day (and not much has changed over the millennia) who used coercion and control to dominate others from a position, as they saw it, *above* everyone else ('lord it over them' v. 42), Jesus understands leadership as serving from *below*. Not from just a little below but from the lowest position of all, that of slave. For Jesus, leadership is about humility and service, acknowledging the shared vulnerability of our humanness.

To be human is to be both powerful and vulnerable. This can be a difficult tension to live with and to reconcile. Power means the ability to things, to act on the world, to elicit a response. God gave us this power – to choose, to refuse, to create, to destroy. Even a tiny baby can use its voice to elicit a response from its caregivers. However, as humans, we are also made vulnerable. To be vulnerable is to be at risk of being hurt and harmed, either physically or emotionally.

It is also human to reject and avoid vulnerability, both in ourselves and in others, and to strive to gain enough power to protect ourselves from facing it. This is the dangerous illusion of power, and Jesus points to this in his teaching. We can't avoid our own vulnerability by possessing or hoarding, by imposing our will on those we see as less than us, by coercing and manipulating others to achieve our own purposes, or even by defeating those we see as enemies. What our drive for power will do, however, is to disrupt relationships - between individuals, families, cultures, nations, and between ourselves and God – and cause lasting damage and harm.

Perhaps the challenge of this passage then, Jesus' challenge to us, is how we will live in the tension between our own power and vulnerability. He challenges us to let go of the illusion that power can make us invulnerable and use what power we have for good. When we let go of power and the need to control, and accept our vulnerability, we have nothing to be afraid of, and nothing to lose. Nothing can be taken from us because we have already willingly released it.

Discussion questions

- What stands out for you in this passage?
- Do you recognise the pattern of leadership that Jesus describes as 'lording it over' others anywhere in your own context? Describe what you have noticed.
- Do you recognise the pattern of leadership that is about service to those who are vulnerable in your own context? Describe what you have noticed.
- In your own life, where and when are you powerful? In what situations are you able to act, to do things or to create? In what situations do you have the ability to impose your will on others? How do you choose to use that power?
- In your own life, where and when are you vulnerable? Who or what has the potential to put your health, well-being and future at risk? How do you choose to manage that vulnerability?