

Heavenly Father, as we hear your word, fill our hearts with your Spirit so we may focus upon Jesus. Amen.

- At school I had a biology teacher called Mr Hodgson. He was balding but a little vain so he carefully combed his sparse hair over the top of his head to produce a comb-over of prodigious length but somewhat narrow width. He was given to pontificating on just about any subject under the sun. This often made him excited, and as he grew more animated his comb-over would dislodge, waving in the air like the handle of a saucepan. It was always a moment we waited for with anticipation as he fell a little from the pedestal he had built for himself.
- However one thing he said has stuck with me, and I still remember it over 40 years later. He was pontificating about ambition and came out with this gem. ‘When you are a teenager, you believe that you can change the world. When you grow up a little you understand that this is a bit idealistic and decide you want to change the lives of the people around you. But when you are fully mature you realise you can only change yourself.’
- Mr Hodgson. He wasn’t ambitious but he did have a desire to be thought of as dignified and wise and to enable the adolescents in his charge to think big thoughts. I can’t make up my mind whether he succeeded or not!
- The mother of the sons of Zebedee, was clearly ambitious for her sons, James and John. A shadowy figure in the Gospels she was clearly a follower of Jesus as in today’s episode, she crops up near Jericho, far away from her native Galilee, about 70 miles from home.
- According to Matthew she is also there at the foot of the cross a few weeks later when all the disciples have run away. Powerful and brave then and not afraid to ask for something she wants.
- So she asks for her sons. She is ambitious for them. She wants the best. She knows they are close to Jesus. Within his inner circle, they accompanied him up the mountain at the transfiguration. She knows they are ‘good boys’ and thinks they deserve some recompense. So she went to Jesus and ‘*said to him, ‘Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.’*’
 - I don’t know whether she was thinking of Jesus as an earthly Messiah about to start a revolution, dislodge the Romans and inaugurate a new free Kingdom for the Jews where he was king and James and John were his second and third in command. Perhaps she was, or perhaps she was envisaging something more like Jesus had been teaching about. The Kingdom of God, after he’d been raised from the dead, where her sons, in her view, could be powerful and active.
- I hope Jesus smiles at her kindly as he tried to put her right. After all, it must have been so obvious to her. They were good boys. They were committed to the cause. They were clearly very close to Jesus. In her view, and after all she knew them very well, who could be a better choice. And she did want the best for them!
- Before we go any further, what are your ambitions in life? Are they targets or bucket lists for you or visions for someone else? What do you hope for? And how are they connected to your Christian faith?
- The mother of James and John at this point in Matthew’s Gospel had clearly not fully understood Jesus’ mission. She was thinking in terms of success, of victory, of reward.
- Whereas the more I discover about Jesus the more he seems to speak to failure, to renewed chances, to acceptance. All values that stem from love rather than ambition. The reward seems to come not in positions of power but in the words of St Richard of Chichester, rather ‘in knowing that we do his will’.
- How do your ambitions or dreams, for yourself or anyone else, match up to these Christ-like values? ‘*Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.*’
- When we get it wrong it tends to lead to anger or envy or other less honourable emotions. ‘*When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers.*’
- However it seems the wonderful thing about this passage is that Jesus heard their mother’s very human and natural request and translated it into something valuable. James, John and their mother continued on their journey following Jesus, were there variously at the crucifixion and the resurrection and certainly the brothers were very active as early Christians in Acts, inspired by the Holy Spirit. It’s not hard to infer that their loving, doting, wonderful mother was there as well.

- And James certainly did *'drink the cup that I am about to drink'* as Jesus predicted. You may know that this cup contained the blood of Christ. It is the cup of suffering and wrath which is commonly talked about in Old Testament prophecies. The cup of martyrdom. So skip to the Acts reading and let's hear it!
- *'King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword.'* I hope his loving and now grieving mother was able to reconcile her dreams for her son with this outcome. A martyr's crown in the kingdom of God. Whether she could, might depend on whether she had realised how Christian ambition pushes you in one direction only, that of following Jesus and living his values of servanthood and acceptance and forgiveness. Some cup of wrath he had to drink!
 - I think it's highly likely that she had been through the Pentecost experience as well as the disciples and therefore the Spirit of Jesus was helping her to see truth out of confusion.
- Herod of course had his own ambitions. He desired to be popular. He desired power. The very next verse after our reading continues, *'After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.'*
 - You can read about Peter's miraculous escape from prison which contains some amazingly comic touches, in the succeeding verses. Was James's mother left wondering the very natural question, 'Why was Peter rescued and not her son?' And how do you think she might answer it?
- Herod's ambitions are remarkably transparent to the reader. It's easy to see them for what they are: tawdry and grasping, courting popularity rather than integrity. I imagine he didn't see them like that at all. I imagine he thought of himself as steering a difficult path in placating the Romans and keeping the Jewish people happy.
- What are your ambitions in life? Are they targets or bucket lists for you or visions for someone else? What do you hope for? And how connected to your Christian faith are these ambitions, and visions?
- Remember that we are Jesus people as well. We have been through the Pentecost experience as well. We have the Spirit of Jesus to lead us into all truth.
- I'm not sure I want to add any extra challenge to what these words imply for us. Speaking personally, I find it quite challenging enough pitting my human desires to be successful, to be popular, to enjoy some relaxation, to be financially secure both for me and for my children, with the Christlike call to follow him, to be a servant, to drink the cup of Christ's blood. I hope I'm not like Herod, but I do feel very warm towards James and John's mother as she tries to reconcile her dreams with her Christian hopes.
 - How do you relate to this?
- And how about the ambitions you may have for the Church?
 - The first bit of the Acts reading is very revealing. . A *'severe famine'* was prophesied in Antioch to cover *'all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius'*. What did the disciples in Antioch do?
 - Was their first thought to make sure they had enough food for themselves, panic buying in the Antioch branch of Tesco? Was their ambition to live the maxim that 'charity begins at home'? No it seems it was rather different. *'The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.'*
 - This seems to me rather similar to how we reacted during the beginnings of the pandemic, being intimately involved in caring for the isolated and needy in Baldock. And it seems rather similar to the sacrificial giving that I see amongst the members of the congregation! Whilst we can't be said to be rolling in cash we are therefore certainly much more secure than many other churches in the diocese.
 - So be encouraged!!
- But what of the future ambitions for the Church? If we are successful and grow in numbers, we can be a real force for good in the town. If we are popular, others will want to join us. That's quite a seductive dream. But remember that God doesn't deal in success or influence, he values forgiveness following failure, acceptance and love.. He doesn't ask us to be popular. He calls us to speak the truth.
- How can we be a servant Church in this way? What truths is the Spirit calling us to say? And how is Jesus calling us to live? Following the thoughts of my school biology teacher with whom I started this sermon, if we manage to be renewed by the Holy Spirit, and change ourselves, will we manage to influence other people as well?