



## **What do you want me to do?**

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Year B, Ordinary 29

Hebrews 5:1-6; Mark 10:35-45

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Journeys usually take us away from what is most familiar, they take us into territories or situations that exercise our critical and analytical faculties. We usually compare where we are with what we are most familiar with, or hope for, whether that be by way of questions about difference, attempts to make choices to secure safety, or seeking a better understanding of what we are experiencing.

John and I have just returned from a long journey to Crete. We have been to Crete before and find it a place very different from NZ: NZ being one of the most recent countries in the world to receive human habitation and Crete one of the oldest. There is much to reflect on in the landscape of Crete, in the cultural priorities and in the structures and the social systems that give shape to the lives of the people.

Christianity has been in Crete since about 64 CE when it is said Paul visited Crete on his 4th missionary journey and appointed Titus the first 'bishop' to bring some order to the lives of the people of Crete and especially those who were to espouse Christianity. Paul seemed to have the impression the Cretans were a rather disordered and rebellious people who needed to be brought into line! I'm not sure he achieved this nor if the centuries since have achieved it! They still seem to me to be a people who have their own sense of their own authority, with an impressive self-determination and powerful set of cultural priorities shaped by their history.

Mark sets this middle section of his narrative gospel within a journey that Jesus and his disciples were making to Jerusalem for the Passover. As with most journeys nothing was stable, they were on the move, out of their comfort zones and wondering how to secure some structure and security for themselves. Last

week we hear this reflected in the petition of the rich man who ran up to Jesus asking how he could secure eternal life for himself - after all he had kept all the commandments all his life! The uncertainty of the setting and the anxiety reflected in the stories of course mirrors the social context that the writer of Mark's Gospel and his audience were experiencing about 70 AD when the 'indestructible' temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and there was great social upheaval during the time of Emperor Nero's persecution. Safety and security, a place in which to feel confident were likely in the minds of those bearing the brunt of the persecution. In times of social uncertainty and upheaval such as this there is much jockeying for power and influence.

Mark is reflecting on this with words of caution to those who have declared themselves to be followers of Jesus.

In the text for today Mark writes

“Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him.

‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘we want you to do for us whatever we ask.’ ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ he asked. They replied, ‘Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.’” (Mark 10:35-37, NRSV)

In this passage the disciples James and John ask Jesus for a place of honour. It was reasonable for them to expect Jesus, the leader of the group of disciples, to be able to elevate them to a position of 'glory' or honour and prestige. As leader, and within the relational expectations of the time, he could do this if he wanted to. In their request to sit at Jesus' right and left, they show their yearning for affirmation, for status and power and a sense of security. But Jesus responds with a radical redefinition of the 'glory' or prestige they seek; the power and authority they hope for. He expands on what he hears them asking for by telling them that real power and authority do not come from positional authority, or from appointments to seemingly powerful places in the structures of society. It does **not** come from positions of importance, being able to access the service of others – of subordinates - or being able to tell them what they should be doing. Rather it comes from **servicing others**, working on their behalf, especially the marginalized and vulnerable: it comes with being recognised by others as someone who has the best interests of others front of mind and heart, and, being willing **to do something** to ensure their wellbeing.

**This teaching is as transformative today as it was then.** I have been reflecting on this while visiting Crete and walking through the ancient ruins of palaces and temples and mighty fortresses immersed in the antiquity and history of the island.

As I *wondered on the one hand* at the ancient civilizations of the Minoan and Mycenaean peoples, and the Byzantium, Ottoman and Venetian empires that ruled Crete from time to time, and *on the other hand* experienced the contemporary shared life in the community of a traditional mountain village, I was reminded of the contrast between worldly power and the justice-hearted love that Jesus calls us to embody.

Greece's history is filled with stories of empires, kings, and rulers vying for dominance. From the Minoan palaces of Knossos to the imposing fortresses built by the Venetians, power and prestige were often measured by the grandeur of one's achievements. Yet, as I stood among the crumbling walls, I was impressed by how transient such power and glory is. The once-great empires of Crete have long since faded, their leaders' names largely forgotten. What remains is not the power they wielded, but the legacy of the communities they built, the art they created, and the lives they impacted. I wondered what legacy I would be leaving!

In this light, Jesus' words take on a new resonance. "Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be a slave of all" (Mark 10:43-44). Jesus turns the concept of power upside down. The desire for status and influence—symbolized in James and John's request—is natural, but it is not the path Jesus calls us to walk. Instead, Jesus points us towards a life of justice - making service, where the greatest honour is found not in lording over others, but in lifting them up, working for justice.

During my time in Crete, I was frequently moved by how the spirit of service and hospitality endures even today. This ancient ethos of welcoming the stranger, offering a meal, and sharing hospitality is deeply woven into the fabric of Greek culture. It reflects the values that Jesus himself modelled: a love that transcends status and seeks to make the stranger a friend.

Walking through the villages, eating in village squares and meeting locals who, generously offer what they have, reminds me of Jesus feeding those who are hungry, and sharing what wealth is to be had. The people we were living amongst were not wealthy by our standards, but there was always a gift from the store of what they had - oranges, eggs, olive oil, flowers, wine. This is radical hospitality. To share, and to serve, and to include, is the greatness Jesus speaks of. It is an act of love that quietly transforms both the one who serves, who gives, and the one who receives. It is the heart of the gospel stories.

In a world that often measures success by wealth, influence, and status, how can we, as followers of Jesus, embody this servant-hearted leadership? We are an Anglican community, as such we are called to be both prophetic and pastoral. Our mission is not to seek positions of honour but to be the hands and feet of Christ—working for justice, serving the poor, and lifting the downtrodden.

Like the ruins of Crete’s mighty palaces, worldly power will eventually crumble, but the impact of community care and hospitality endures. Jesus asks us to look beyond our own desires for recognition. The stories of Mark and the other gospel writers, and the admonitions of Paul, challenge us to see the needs of those around us and **to act**—to be a voice for the voiceless, to care for the earth acting in its best interests, to welcome the refugee and the stranger. This is what it means to “drink the cup” that he drank— and live ‘a life poured out for others.’

So, as I return here to our community at St. Matthews, I do so with a renewed sense of what it means to serve. The ruins of Crete have reminded me that our Christian witness is not about building monuments of greatness but nurturing the relationships and communities around us. Our call is to make visible the love of God through acts of service, however small they may seem, and by building relationships that demonstrate care and concern.

I love it that in the very next incident in the story Mark is telling of the journey to Jerusalem, Jesus asks a blind beggar who is sitting on the side of the road and calls to him, (much to the annoyance of many), “what do you want me to do for you?” ((10:51). And this time Jesus did as he was asked.