

Sermon: Sitting Beside Jesus in Glory

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, Oct 17, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Magnanimous: the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word as “*showing or suggesting a lofty and courageous spirit, a nobility of feeling and generosity of mind*”. Magnanimous (the word in Latin literally means “great soul”) describes someone who is goal-oriented, high achieving. Someone who is courageous, noble yet forgiving. Magnanimous is hard to attain, a great soul is hard to find.

The flip side of magnanimous is pusillanimous. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as “*lacking courage and resolution*”, or “*marked by contemptible timidity*.” It describes someone who is fearful, indecisive, someone who is selfish, unforgiving, and small.

I once heard a story about someone who was out fishing and caught a strange looking fish. He reeled the fish in, unhooked it, and threw it on the ground next to him. The fish started writhing in agony, and to the man’s surprise and amazement, began to speak, “Please, throw me back into the lake and I’ll grant you a wish, any one wish.” “Any one wish?”, the man mused as visions of expensive fast cars, beautiful women paraded through his head. “Fine,” he finally exclaimed, “Grant me three wishes and I’ll throw you back.” The fish answered while struggling for breath, “Sorry, only one wish.” The man’s vision of grandeur was at stake and after giving the matter considerable thought, he demanded, “What do you take me for? A fool? You are not really in a position to bargain! So I’ll settle for two wishes. Two!” The fish answered meekly, “only one....” Fuming, the man debated the pros and cons of accepting the one wish or insisting on an extra. Finally, relented, “All right fish, you win, one wish.” Unfortunately, by then the fish was dead.

Pusillanimous, I say, fits that man in the story. But before I get too judgemental on him, I have to be honest that if I was really granted a wish, turning it into three would’ve been my first inclination. Examples of pusillanimous characters are like dandelions dotting the lawnscape. It is harder to find an example of magnanimous person, harder to find a ‘great soul’, even harder to shape and mould someone to be a ‘great soul’.

So let me put to you this question: James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, are they magnanimous or pusillanimous? Our Gospel reading today contains the story of James and John approaching Jesus with a daring request. They first paved the way with a highly inappropriate demand, "*Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.*" (Mark 10:35). We are reminded that in the parallel passage of Matthew 20:20, it is their mother who were paving the way for them. Much easier to blame Mom than to accept responsibility for one's action.

"*What is it you want me to do for you?*", asked Jesus without taking any offense. So, this is their request, "*Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.*", they added. To be at the right and at the left of Jesus, is a figurative way of denoting positions of honour and of power. It is commonly depicted in religious art—in paintings and stained glass windows. Take a look around the sanctuary of St. Giles. There are quite a number of stained glass windows expressing precisely that idea. Allow me to highlight three: the Lewis, the Spratt and the Adamson

The Lewis window was erected in 1960, in loving memory of J.Ezra Lewis and his wife Ena. It depicts the resurrected Jesus, standing in front of an empty tomb, saying "*I am the resurrection and the life*". Flanking Jesus are two unnamed women, probably Mary Magdalene, Mary of Joseph or Salome.

Let's now shift our attention to the Spratt window. It was dedicated to the glory of God and in loving memory of Richard and Charlotte Spratt. Here Jesus is depicted as knocking on a door while carrying a lantern. Flanking him on the right is St. Peter. You can see him holding the key to kingdom of heaven and the book of life. Flanking Jesus on the left is St. James, the disciple, carrying a staff of pilgrimage.

The Adamson window was dedicated in 1954, in memory of W.O.I.J. Douglas Adamson. Here Jesus was coming out of a storm, saying "*Be of good cheer. It is I. Be not afraid.*" Flanking him to the right is St. Andrew, carrying his own X shaped cross. Flanking Jesus to the left is St. Michael the Archangel. Often depicted as defender of the faith while carrying a sword, a shield and a lance.

Much of these depictions could be traced back to the Scripture, although some are undoubtedly legends or Catholic traditions dating back the the medieval time. The key point that I want to highlight is the positions to the left and to the right of Jesus are considered as privileged, important, and according the the Gospel story, sought after by James and John.

Another point that I should highlight: what the two disciples of Jesus actually asked is to sit with Jesus in his glory—an allusion to sitting beside the judgement throne in the final days of the Lord. It is a darling request, a bold ask.

Jesus, sensing their naivety, said to them in verse 38, *“You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”*

Sharing a cup is a sign of fellowship, of either God’s blessings or of divine wrath. Evidently the two disciples were probably thinking of the former rather than the later. As to baptism, it is more than a simple ceremonial washing or a rite of initiation. What Jesus was referring to is the actual participation in his death and resurrection.

So without careful consideration of the full extend of sharing the cup and being baptized into Christ, the two disciples replied, *“We are able.”* Daring, bold and naive.

Then Jesus said to them in verse 39-40, *“The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; 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.”*

To be honest, I don’t know if we should regard James and John as magnanimous or as pusillanimous. On the one hand, we cringe when undeserving souls make a fool of themselves by seeking high offices they were clearly not qualified to do so. The delicate mechanism of nomination, whether formal or informal, exist mainly to allow those aiming high to say they were encouraged or chosen to do so.

On the other hand, what is wrong with aiming high? Don’t we want our children, our next generation to do precisely that? Aiming to sit by Jesus, on the left and on the right, in his messianic kingdom—there is no other goal higher or worthier. *“Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”* (Matthew 6:33)

The problem I think with the request of James and John, is their lack of understanding that the path to glory must first go through suffering, and this suffering is purposeful, redemptive, and ordained by God. Isaiah 53:4-6, also known as the Song of the Suffering Servant, sings precisely that, *“Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him*

was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

The punishment that Jesus endured was the cross. Though he was sinless and without guilt, he carried, or should I say that the Lord God laid on him, the iniquity of us all. In the most inexplicable way, by his bruises we are healed, and by his blood we are made whole, reconciled finally with the Triune God, our creator, redeemer, and sustainer.

It is to this redemptive suffering that James and John and the rest of the Twelve were invited to partake. Indeed, most prophetically, the words of Jesus became true. James and John did share in the cups of Jesus, and were baptized into the baptism of Christ.

According to the Scripture and the tradition of the early Church, among the Twelve, James was the first to be martyred. He was beheaded by King Herod Agrippa I of Judaea. His body was taken to Spain, and have attracted pilgrims from all over the world. John, the author of the Gospel, of the three letters bearing his name, and of the book of Revelation, was to be martyred last, alone in the island of Patmos. The manner of his death unknown. As the early church father Tertullian would later observe and explained in Apologeticus: “*The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.*”

I shall leave with you one additional teaching of Jesus, perhaps the most important one for us all, that would eventually turned the pusillanimous disciples into magnanimous apostles.

When the other ten disciples caught wind of the request of James and John, they became angry. Perhaps out of a sense of unfairness or injustice, or a simple case of jealousy—why didn’t I ask first? Anyway, they were up in arms.

So Jesus reminded them not to be like the Gentiles, fighting amongst themselves who is greater, with the strong lording over the weak and the meek. Jesus reminded all his the disciples, “*Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*” (Mark 10:43-45)

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.