

Prima-donnas and Exuberant Children

A sermon on Mark 10:35-45 by Nathan Nettleton, 21 October 2018

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Message

There is nothing wrong with an eager desire for a special closeness to Jesus. Jesus is eager to fulfil such desires, but warns us of the cost of sticking with him.

Sermon

On Friday night, Ian and I travelled together to the BUV delegates gathering, and on the way I was asking him about his experience of singing in an opera. I wanted to know how that experience differed from singing with a choir. He mentioned a number of contrasts and comparisons, and among them, he said that there was more prima-donna behaviour in the opera. He told me that you see it, not just among the actual prima donnas (because that is the technical name of the female lead in an opera), but among the chorus singers. He described one singer from the chorus line who, despite having no greater profile or role than anyone else in the chorus, always jostled for the front-and-centre position in the final bows. Not popular apparently.

We heard the story tonight about the disciples James and John asking Jesus to reserve a special place for them alongside him in his glory, and it struck me that Ian's story of the wannabe prima-donnas would serve very well as an illustration for the kind of sermon I have preached on this story in the past. James and John are seen to be wannabe prima-donnas, trying to big note themselves and get the jump on everyone else in a scramble for glory. I'm sure there will be many very fine sermons preached around the world today saying just that.

But just as I was preparing to preach along those lines again this week, a comment from one of James Alison's reflections on this passage (*The Joy of Being Wrong*, p. 228) pulled me up short and drew my attention to something I'd never noticed about it before. And now I wonder whether our usual way of interpreting this story actually falls into the very mistake that Jesus is challenging in it.

What I had never noticed before is that Jesus doesn't actually rebuke James and John for their request at all. He may even be commending them. He tells them that what they are asking for is bigger and more costly than they can imagine, and that he can't actually grant it, but the story doesn't actually suggest that he disapproves of their asking.

The thing that prompts a rebuke from Jesus is not James and John's request, but the reaction of the other ten disciples to their request. It is the ten, not the two, who cop a dressing down from Jesus. If you're not convinced, look up the passage. Once it's pointed out, it's so obvious that you can't believe that you didn't notice it before.

So you can see my problem, can't you? The ten disciples were criticising James and John, and I've got a file full of old sermons in which I followed their lead and criticised James and John. But the Bible seems to be telling us that what stirred Jesus up and prompted him to deliver a rebuke was in fact that criticism of James and John. I might have to quietly delete that file while nobody's looking.

So what's going on here? Have we really got this story wrong, and if so, why?

Well, firstly let me say that if we have got it wrong, we probably don't need to beat ourselves up over it. Prima-donna behaviour, trying to big note yourself at the expense of others, is something that Jesus rebukes. We heard it just four weeks ago, or about a page back in the gospel (Mark 9:30-37). Jesus caught his disciples arguing about which of them was the greatest, and he was none too impressed. But if we've got this week's one wrong, it is probably just because we have conflated the two stories and seen James and John's request as them falling back into the same desire to be the greatest. But maybe they're not. Jesus doesn't seem to think they are.

How does Jesus respond to their request. He seems to hear their request as just an expression of enthusiastic support. They want to stick with him. They want to go where he goes. They want to go through whatever he goes through alongside him. They want to be as close to him as they can and to hang in there with him all the way to the end, til he's seated in glory. Why should they be criticised for that?

Well, this time I'm seeing that Jesus doesn't criticise them for that. He challenges them about whether they really know what they are asking, whether they are really up for what it would cost them. "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?"

But when they stick to their guns and say "We are," he doesn't snort and say "Fat chance." He affirms them. He says, "Unfortunately, you will indeed drink the same cup and go through the same baptism. But as to whether you will be the ones on my right and my left when we get there, I won't be the one arranging that." Can you hear what Jesus is alluding to here? It's the cross, and the ironic, almost black humour way that Jesus talks about his impending death. "When I'm hung up in all my glory, there will indeed be two hung up on my right and my left, but I'm not going to get to choose who'll get that 'honour'."

There's no criticism of James and John in that. We say the same thing in our baptismal vows. Come what may, we will follow Jesus and stick with him and close as we can. And now that I see it, I think Jesus even sounds quite chuffed that they are so enthusiastic in their devotion to him.

But the other ten disciples are mightily pissed off. And as the story is told to us, it is their anger that Jesus reacts to when he delivers the rebuke about people trying to lord it over others. Why? This question is personal. I've joined in the criticism of James and John before, so I need to hear Jesus's rebuke directed at me and ask myself why I was ready to jump on them. What was going on for me, and for the ten, or for any of us who might have also jumped in and stuck the boots in?

When I take a good hard look in the mirror, I realise that James and John make me feel a bit uneasy, a bit inadequate, a bit embarrassed even. I like to think that I am fully devoted to Jesus and fully committed to following him, come what may, but James and John make me look a bit wishy washy, a bit half hearted. They're a bit too extravagant, a bit too enthusiastic, a bit too gushy. And I don't like being outdone. So rather than rise to the challenge to lift my game, I find it easier to join in trying to tear them down. They're not really any better than me, I snarl. They're just arrogant pricks who think they're better than the rest of us. They're just prima-donnas pushing their way to the front of the stage for more applause.

But Jesus sees through me. Jesus sees that the one who was getting all competitive about this was not James or John, but me. And when I accused them of being arrogant and competitive, it was just projection. It was me that couldn't cope with my own feelings of inadequacy and luke-warm passions, and falling behind. It was me that was trying to lord it over them by trying to drag them back down to my level and insist that they conform to the lowest common denominator.

James and John's comments, which I referred to before, suggest that one of the reasons that we fall into this mess is that we have a messed up understanding of the role our desires play in Christian ethics. Too often we have been reared on a belief that what God really wants of us is that we say no to our desires and live stern lives of heroic self-denial.

Do you have desires for good food? A real spiritual hero would spend days and weeks in fasting. Do you have desires for sexual intimacy? A real spiritual hero would be celibate for life. Do you have desires to be super close to Jesus and to be one of his most trusted followers? A real spiritual hero would curb their enthusiasm and maintain a cool and dignified reserve.

Really?!! I don't think so. Sure there are twisted desires that we are called to curb and renounce. The desires for retribution, for revenge, and for the humiliation of our rivals; these things have to go. But passionate desires for a richer life, for more intimate relationships, for deeper commitment, for exuberant joy, and even to be recognized for our efforts, these are things that Jesus affirms and lives to the max as a model of the true humanity we are called to. Jesus has no desire at all to see us turned into thin-lipped, passionless, deniers of life. Jesus is not trying to stamp out our desires. He is simply teaching us to choose the ones that lead to an explosion of life over the ones that would slowly poison us in toxic bile.

James and John wanted the best with all their hearts and Jesus welcomed and celebrated their enthusiasm. But the ten other miserable pricks resented them for it. Make that eleven; I jumped in too. It was all a bit much for dour, sensible, careful us.

You know what? Just a few verses earlier, or two Sundays ago in our listening to these stories, we heard Jesus telling his disciples that if they really wanted to live their way into the culture of God, they would have to receive it like a little child. Perhaps it is actually James and John who were the only ones who had really learned that lesson. It is not that little children are innocent. If you've ever lived with one, you'll know they're not. But they are a whole lot less complicated about what they want, what they desire. Mostly, they just know what they want, they run for it, they come right out and ask for it, and they insist on getting it. It is exactly that sort of up front, full throttle, expectant desire that is able to receive the culture of God.

So if you've been like me, pointing the finger of condemnation at the Jameses and Johns of this world trying to crush their passion and courage under the weight of our disapproval, then I invite you to stand with me and face Jesus's rebuke. But, thanks be to God, it is not a terribly harsh rebuke. We are not being bound and cast into outer darkness to be punished. We are being invited to shake off our chains and free our hearts and join the dance of passionate life. We are being invited to embrace our desire to be our best and, instead of directing that into pulling others back, to unleash it so that we might go freely and joyously surging into the future with all the passion and courage of excited children.