

(Bring forward) May these words be pleasing.

It's a bit grubby. James and John sidle up to Jesus. We want you to do whatever we ask (always a good start). Well, gentlemen, what exactly do you want, asks Jesus. Their request is simple: When (not if, but when) you (Lord) are in charge we (your two best disciples) we want the best jobs – one on your left and one on your right. Grubby.

Over the years the boys and I have had days out, by train, from Northallerton to York. Normally quiet on the way out, sometimes rammed on the way back at the end of boozy race days alongside loud hen do's, where the ladies always seem to be solar powered even in the middle of winter.

On one journey the train was less rowdy but still overcrowded. Alastair was the only one of us to get a seat and he got to sit next to a real VIP, a very important person. On our train was Boris Johnson on his way to an event, campaigning for Brexit. He was important enough to have two minders who added considerably to the crush and even made Boris Johnson appear small.

We are led to believe that in Parliament grubby deals are done (TV). I will support you. Remember me when you are in charge, make me Home Secretary, or Foreign Secretary, or Chancellor of the Exchequer.

So, time for a test of your knowledge: Which minister. 8 pictures, see twice, all (nearly) were ministers but never prime ministers.

CORNELLIUS FUDGE MINISTER OF MAGIC HARRY POTTER

WILLIAM HAGUE, secretary of state of foreign and commonwealth affairs

DAVID BLUNKETT, EDUCATION / HOME (BLIND)

MICHAEL FALLON, DEFENCE

LEON BRITAIN, HOME SECRETARY

NICK CLEGG, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

BARBARA CASTLE, MINISTER OF TRANSPORT

DIANE ABBOT, SHADOW HEALTH AND SHADOW HOME (All 8 / 7 / 6?)

John and James, disciples of Jesus, in his cabinet, the chosen 12. We have supported you. Remember us when you are in charge, make us VIPs on your left and on your right. A bit like two knights sitting either side of King Arthur at his great round table. The other ten disciples were not impressed, and they grumbled. Perhaps such thoughts of self-promotion had never crossed *their* minds before, or perhaps they had and that's precisely why they were so upset

I suspect Jesus enjoyed the honesty of his disciples in the same way that teachers (such as myself) enjoy the honesty and potential of our young students (at least most of the time). James and John are straight to the point and honest. Jesus asks, in response, can you share my baptism? They can, we can, and most of us have. Can you drink the cup that I drink? They can, we can, and most of us will

(this morning). But to be on the right and on the left, that, says Jesus, is for somebody else, not the disciples, and not you and I. That's odd. What's Jesus doing? Jesus calls us out of childish fantasies of being more important than everyone else, being a VIP, or a super hero saving the day, or a warrior, a medieval shining knight sharing a gilt holy grail with King Arthur of Camelot. A fantasy of great victory without cost. Not so, says Jesus. What lies ahead for Jesus and the disciples in Jerusalem is not majestic and glorious.. Instead it is gruesome and desolate.

Jesus prays that he does *not* have to drink from the cup given to him for it is the cup of wrath, a cup of anger and hatred and violence and death. The baptism he faces is an underserved baptism of fire. He knows that his disciples may be called to this same cup and baptism but even they will not be on his left and on his right, instead it will be two grubby insignificant, nameless, thieves, one on his left and one on his right, on their crosses next to Christ's.

Last week we prayed a hymn in which we sang 'self on the cross and Christ on the throne.' If you wish to be great, says Christ, you must be a servant. This is hard. Whoever wishes to be first must be slave of all. This is hard. But in this we turn the world upside down.

This is hard and even harder in the version of this same story in the gospel of Matthew. In Matthew's version it is not James and John who bring themselves to Christ with their selfish request. Instead it is their embarrassing Mum who hauls them in front of Christ and demands that they are both given the highest seats of honour. How recognisable and timeless, and I say that as a school teacher. The drive of a parent to get the best for their children is strong, even if it is at the expense of others.

This next bit is delicate: There is a contrast between the values of Christ and the values of the world (nothing new there). The mother of James and John wished the best for her children. Parents (today) who have lots of money, and spend some of that money sending their child to private schools, are seeking exclusivity and better exam results. You may not like / We may not like this disparity with all other youngsters but at least this is transparent and honest. There are many other wonderful schools with amazing youngsters doing incredible things and having tremendous futures ahead of them. And the church (incl CoE) has the great joy and privilege of Loving and Living and Learning with its church schools. But: Many such church schools, across the land, have attracted a larger proportion of students from certain groups and certain backgrounds who in turn have produced higher exam results. Such schools quickly become full and the yearly decision as to who to accept and who to reject is fraught with moral danger. In putting some children and some types of children first we are putting other children and other types of children last. In this there is a crashing clash with today's gospel (and done in our name). Therefore pray. Pray for our political and church leaders but especially

the education departments in each and every diocese throughout the land as they lead and make policy. And pray for parents at this time of year – those with choices to make and especially for those with little or no choice.

Let us reset the scene back with Jesus, back with his disciples, and their journey to Jerusalem. Jesus gently holds his disciples as they clearly have no idea what lies ahead in Jerusalem. The cup of wrath that Jesus must drink, the baptism of fire that he must endure, and his lifting up on a cross, with criminals on his left and on his right. Jesus will do all this in service, in service of his friends, his disciples, for us, and for the world he has ceaselessly loved since the dawn of time.

He will do this for you. He loves you. Before you were born he loves you, with your every heartbeat he loves you. Beyond the grave he loves you.

Jesus gently holds his disciples and redirects them from personal selfish ambition towards the love and service of others. He continues this service to you through his Holy Spirit, His spirit supporting you in love through the creation around you. Think of those around you now (x2). Each person a gift of God's Holy Spirit to you. And you through service to them are God's gift to them, each of us called to build up and never to put down.

In this 'service' what we normally do now is stand to sing our belief and commitment to the loving God. Perhaps today before we sing our creed we could pray a blessing to each other through the words of the grace – this a statement of our belief and commitment to each other. Please would you stand – feel free to pray this with your eyes closed, or open, look at the floor if you wish, some I know like to look around as they offer this prayer as a gift. If you are comfortable with your neighbours you may even wish to hold the hands of those near you.