

## Mark 10:35-45

On one of those hot, still days we had in June, I preached, at an end of term service, in St Mary the Virgin, on the High, in Oxford, Not an end of term for the University, this was a school, a rather grand and elegant school, founded in 1480. I know the head; she called in a favour.

It was a day for linen suits and panama hats, we drank champagne in the grounds and had a very good lunch; there was cricket. First, of course, we had the service. This was a school bathing in achievement in Oxford's iconic church. Young men and women with heads held high, school colours, examination success, CVs as long as your arm, bright with opinion and bold with style. There were mothers in hats; there were fathers in alarmingly brilliant blazers. Staff and pupils all wore a lily, the founder's flower; there was one pinned onto my preaching scarf. I am pretty sure we sang *Jerusalem* we could have sung 'I know where I am going'. Everyone seemed to have that sense of purpose.

And yet, suddenly and curiously another, very different, note was struck. We had had the readings you might expect 'Let us now praise famous men...' and the big choral pieces that showed off the choir. Then, a poem, by C Day Lewis, called *Walking Away*. He wrote it for his son, a memory of his son beginning at school. C Day Lewis had gone to watch him play football and then the game ended and the little boy had to find his way back to the changing room

*like a satellite  
Wrenched from its orbit, go drifting away  
  
Behind a scatter of boys. I can see  
You walking away from me towards the school  
With the pathos of a half-fledged thing set free  
Into a wilderness, the gait of one  
Who finds no path where the path should be.*

That is just an extract. C Day Lewis pins, so precisely, that little boy's uncertainty, walking alone, one, *Who finds no path where the path should be*. It is a good poem, it is a favourite of mine, but I still cannot understand why they read it that morning. They have it every year apparently. In the midst of all that certainty and ambition, the angular, hesitant sound of the little boy lost.

When C Day Lewis wrote the poem that football was already a distant memory. His son, the boy in the poem, is called Sean, he tells us that the poem was actually written in the middle of another walking away, when the poet left his wife, Sean's mother. Perhaps that is why the poem ends

*I have had worse partings, but none that so  
Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly  
Saying what God alone could perfectly show –  
How selfhood begins with a walking away,  
And love is proved in the letting go.*

C Day Lewis turns the sorry picture of his son, after football, into a broader point about all of us needing to let go of those we love even if it means watching them step out uncertainly. He makes it a point about God, the God who he suggests lets us go, the God who let Christ go in order to come amongst us. The Christ who, in the words of Philippians

*though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross Philippians 2:5-8*

That is what we heard that morning in Oxford,

*How selfhood begins with a walking away,  
And love is proved in the letting go*

It was like dropping a pebble down a well. There was a sudden, awkward silence because we all thought we were saying something else, something about ambition and a God who loves success.

We started in Oxford because I wanted to introduce that idea of letting go. Now we need to shift our attention to the road to Jerusalem. That is where our gospel treading was set, that story about James and John

*"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."*

They asked that question on the road to Jerusalem. That is really significant. Jesus has been working wonders in Judea and beyond the Jordan the crowds have flocked to him. They have been asking *Who is this? What will he do next?* He has been admired, he has been doubted, he has been challenged and above all everyone has wanted to know *Who is this; where is all this leading?* Now we know; it is going to Jerusalem. We have only just been told that. Our reading began at Mark 10:35. Mark 10:32 reads,

*They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem Mark 10:32*

The mood of the gospel changes in an instant. This is the moment when we learn that the story of Jesus' life will not end well. Jesus spells it out, Mark 10: 33,

*See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death*

Jesus will suffer and die. The road to Jerusalem leads to the cross. An the next thing, the very next thing that happens is that James and John come to him,

*"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." ... "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."*

We have to notice where they ask this favour, when they ask this favour. Jesus has just explained that he will suffer and instantly they want a share in his glory. They have not listened; they have misunderstood. Mark is the gospel in which the disciples constantly get it wrong, blunder about waving swords, rush into every wrong conclusion and run away at the point of crisis. They do not understand. It is what Jesus tells them,

*"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?"*

He gives James and John what they never asked for – they can share in the suffering they had just refused to name. What they want however, the share in his glory, that cannot be promised.

*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*

Then, Jesus turns to all the disciples and says some very important things about all of us having a vocation to serve – the Gentiles have rulers who lord it over them, he explains - *it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant*. That is a challenge about our ambition, James and John wanting to sit in seats of power. It is an important point, but it is not what I want to say to you this morning. I want us to notice that Jesus says

*You do not know what you are asking*

I want us to hear him say

*to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant*

If ever we are going to understand Mark's gospel we have to hear Mark tells us that this magnificent account of the life of Jesus Christ shines like the noonday sun and yet is also wrapped in mists of mystery. Mark is the gospel in which Jesus dies defeated, there are no words of reassurance from the cross – no 'It is accomplished'. Mark leaves us gasping. There is a very good, very short little book about Mark, written by Rowan Williams, he says that Mark

*Takes you constantly in and out of silence, in and out of language. Here for a moment you see, you grasp; and then you have to let go again.*

And that is what James and John so struggle to understand. They signed up for another story. They were full of ambition and purpose, they looked for thrones and for glory and found themselves, instead, on the road to Jerusalem.

I think we can recognize their confusion, I think we can name the faith to which they were clinging on so tightly. They just wanted it to make sense; they wanted the answer, the ending, the meaning, put into their hands. We all do. Ask me what is the biggest challenge in ministry, ask me what is the biggest challenge in my own life and I will tell you that I just want it to make sense. I want to be able to explain. I want the story to have a proper ending. As a priest, I have had to sit, so many times, with people bewildered by the pain and grief they feel. Why did their son have to die, why was that argument never resolved, why can't he explain, why won't she understand? There is so much unfinished business; there are so many loose ends. I feel it to, not just when I try to find words for other people who can make no sense of their lives, but in the blind alleys of my own life.

We, I, have to hear what Jesus says,

*You do not know what you are asking*

However much we long for our faith to provide us with all the answers; however much we strive to believe in such a way that it all makes sense, we have to learn to let go. Faith, Christian faith, is an act of trust. It is trust in the God who will redeem this, will resolve this in his time and not in ours. Faith hands over the ending of the story. Faith believe that love endures and that love can be trusted. Faith accepts that we, I, do not hold the reins.

C Day Lewis was a fabulous poet, but he was not a great theologian. In fact, he was wrong. If you remember the poem, he told us,

*Saying what God alone could perfectly show –  
How selfhood begins with a walking away,  
And love is proved in the letting go.*

He wants us to believe that we let go because that is what Gods does, that is what love does. No, that is not what I am saying. I am saying we let go because Christ tells us we must. The answer is not in our hands, indeed the answer for us might be painful; we might suffer. But God never lets go. That is what we believe. In that we trust. God's love is constant and it will never let us go.