

Ask Not What Your Church Can Do...

Mark 10:35-45

On a freezing Friday the 20th January, 1961, the newly elected President of the United States, John F. Kennedy delivered his inaugural address. He spoke as the first of a new generation of leaders who had been born in the 20th century, and who had endured the horrors of two great wars. Now they faced the threat of mutually assured destruction, where the two great superpowers, the Soviet Union and the USA, had hundreds of nuclear weapons trained on each other. The end was only a push of a button away.



Against this backdrop, the new president challenged his citizens to band together for the cause of freedom: 'Now the trumpet summons us again — not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need; not as a call to battle, though embattled we are — but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, "rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation" — a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself...

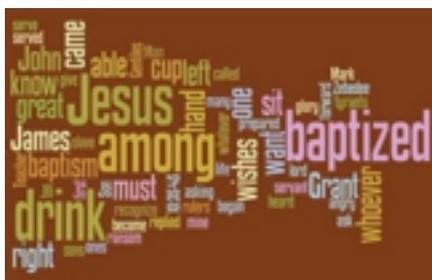


And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.'

I'm not sure that any political leader could or would make the same kind of speech today. In fact, I think



we hear more of the opposite spirit. "Ask what your country can do for you?" or variants on the same theme. We have the expectation that the world is created to satisfy us. Self-interest is hot property, whether in the way that governments campaign hard by promising tax cuts, and advertisers remind us that we are the most important person in the world, and that our needs are paramount.



"Ask what your country...neighbour...friend can do for you." We see the same question asked in today's gospel. "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." In the words of JFK: 'Ask not what you can do for Jesus, but what Jesus can do for you?' And what do they want? "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand, and one at your left, in your glory." This question comes hot on the heels of Jesus' third and final

prediction of his death and resurrection. Perhaps they've fast forwarded through Jesus' talk of his betrayal, trial, beating and death, and landed on his resurrection. Then Jesus' kingdom will come, and they want to be prime candidates for leadership in the glorious new world that Jesus will inaugurate.

But in their eagerness to cut to the chase, they haven't heard Jesus' clear words about what it means to be his disciple. What Jesus is doing for them right now, in his patience with them, in his work of healing and teaching, is the heart of his life: sacrificial service. And so Jesus draws them back again to the bottom line: "Are you able to drink that cup that I will drink, or be baptised with the baptism with which I will be baptised?" Jesus reminds them of what he's just said. He's on his way to an appointment with a cross. This is the cup of suffering from which Jesus will drink fully of his Father's wrath over sin. "Are you signing up for this? Are you ready for it?"

James and John say they are, but they don't understand. In time they will. They will suffer for Jesus' name. James will lose his life to the power of the state, executed by Herod Agrippa. John will be exiled on the prison island of Patmos.

We can easily imagine how angry the rest of the disciples were when they heard about what James and John did. Perhaps they were disappointed they didn't get in first. The disciples were openly engaging in the art of exercising power over each other so as to be best placed in relation to Jesus. Even in this instance, we see how seeking power over others is divisive for a community, or a committee, or a congregation.

Jesus has power. And authority over the disciples. That's not a problem when it exercised in love. See how Jesus uses his authority to gently bring the disciples together and, again, patiently explains the meaning of his life among them. "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognise as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them." You know how the world works. You know the iron fist of Rome. Romans lordship is power to coerce, control and dominate. Having power over others is often overpowering others. Caesar does it. People do it. And you are doing it to one another.



WHOEVER WANTS TO BECOME
great
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MARK 10:43-45
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"Not so with you," Jesus now says. It's time for a new way. The disciples must have squirmed as they heard these words. What do we feel when we heard Jesus? We confessed/ will confess today that there are elements of self-service in what we do. Do I call myself a servant but love the power and recognition that comes from being a pastor? Do I pay lip-service to all this talk about placing the needs of other before my own? Do I approach ministry on the basis of how it meets my needs? What about you and your connection with St Paul's? And your friends, your family? How do you view the relationships you have? Are they for your benefit, or for the benefit of others?

"Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." Hear what Jesus says: Aspire to greatness. Yes. But be the greatest servant. Want to lead. A great aspiration. But lead in sacrifice and example. Follow my example. See how I am serving you now. And see what is to come. "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Let's tweak the famous words of JFK's speech. We begin here. First, "Ask what your Christ, your Saviour has done for you." Jesus must be the starting point for us. He is our life, our hope, our salvation, our energy, our motivation. In his death on the cross, he has rescued us from the pit of our own selfishness. He has given his life away for us, that in the power of his resurrection our lives may be given away in service of others. This is what it means to be a disciple. We cannot do anything unless we depend fully on him, trust our lives to him, and follow in the wake of his servant leadership.

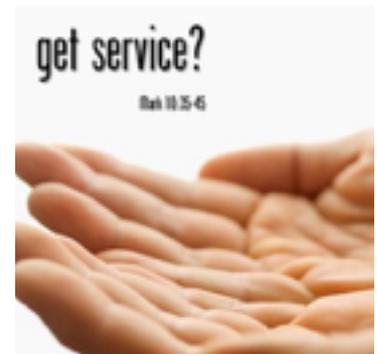
Only then we can take the next step: "Ask not what your church can do for you — ask what you can do for your church." In August we actually did ask what your church can do for you. And 214 of you responded. You said that you were grateful for the opportunity to speak about what was close to your heart. You told us how we might grow as a congregation. You made us aware of areas where we are not doing as well as we could, and things we need to change. You were passionate, convicted, engaged, frank, upset, hopeful, helpful.



Those who lead St Paul's, your Church Council, ministry teams, pastors and staff, are committed to listening to what you have asked our church to do. We are working hard to process what we've heard, and seeking the Spirit's wisdom to determine the path God is calling us along. We are conscious that we are called to lead in the power and the pattern of Jesus. We ask you to pray that we are given the strength to do just that.

But over the next months we will be asking you questions that have at the heart this one question: "What can you do for your church?" What part can you play in the mission that God is placing right around us, and above us? How will you be part of a servant-community planted in Box Hill, with opportunities to show love-leadership expanding exponentially?

I know that this is not the only question you face. The world which you and I are called to serve is bigger than St Paul's. I encourage you to ask the same questions of the way you follow Jesus and model him among your family, in your street, at your work, with your friends. I'm not playing one off against the other.



Today, and every time we gather in worship, God serves us. We receive the love of God anew: in the word of God which "awakens new understanding, pleasure and devoutness and produces a pure heart and pure thoughts", as my devotion on Thursday morning reminded me, and in the body and blood of Jesus our Saviour, which feeds us physically and spiritually. This is how a servant heart is created. And this servant heart is exercised as we ask ourselves this question and answer it with our lives: "Ask what you can do for your country...your church...your brother and sister in Christ...your friend...your neighbour...your enemy...". Amen.