

Albany Presbyterian Church

20th October 2024

Two weeks ago, I attended a conference of pastors and leaders of churches in New Zealand hosted by Laidlaw College and Holy Trinity Anglican Cathedral. The conference's central theme was 'abide,' taken from John 15, where Jesus says in John 15:7, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish..." "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (John 15:7).

I was pleasantly surprised. The conference was well organized and attended, representing a wider spectrum of denominations and traditions. I think there is genuine 'down-to-earth'ness about us Kiwis; no one stood out though they were leaders or want-a-be leaders; instead, they were humble, kind, and gave each other respect and space to be. And within so many, there was a deep yearning for the work of the Holy Spirit to be done in the places of our cities, our lives, and in our world. And Prayer... some powerful prayers have been said. I have not been to a ministry conference where I pray this much.

The gospel reading from Mark 10 35-45 tells the disciples' story. As they approached Jerusalem, they became, Some might call it, 'practical' and 'assertive,' seeking a position of importance and power. After all, there were twelve names and only two positions of power when Jesus entered the city and became King.

Regardless of your political taste or distaste, this story is relevant. It is hard not to hear that the US election is less than two weeks away. Because the United States has so much influence over the world, especially in conflicts in Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, and others, it is not unreasonable to say that the leader of the United States will affect these wars. The conflict between the two has been quite disturbing, and we don't need to go further. This is not far from our own story; there are those among us, the leaders, who are also subject to vanity and ambition; profit margin and efficiency come before the well-being of the people in their care.

John Calvin calls this passage a right mirror of human vanity, which we see in this passage, and we can appreciate the conflict among the disciples over John and James' actions. It is often a common insight and accusation that those who lead seek their benefit and glory rather than the benefit of others. Jesus was a completely different leader. Jesus says others (gentiles) think of their leaders to rule over them; their great ones are tyrants over them, but it is not so among you. He was not seeking his power and glory; his leadership and what he wanted to accomplish were about the salvation of all. The goal is to serve, not to be served. Whoever wants to be first must be last.

Hebrews 5 helps our understanding that Hebrew invites us to see Jesus as the priest mediating between heaven and earth, between us and God.

It goes back to the book of Exodus 29; God institutes daily offerings of burnt offerings of lambs, one in the morning and one in the evening. The offering is in the morning and the evening. In verse 42, This shall be a continual sacrifice throughout your generations at the doors of the tabernacle of testimony, before the Lord, where I will be known to you to speak to you. There, I shall give directions to the children of Israel and be sanctified in my glory. So, I will sanctify the tabernacle of testimony and the altar. The priest's primary role was to prepare and offer the

sacrifice of providing on behalf of the people. They offered sacrifices for thanksgiving, repentance, and other purposes.

God chose Jesus to be the High Priest, and the priest's job was to offer sacrifices for his and others' sins. Jesus' death and resurrection ultimately showed that sacrifice was once perfect; Hebrews 5 says he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obeyed him. God designated him as a high priest in the order of Melchizedek, the King of Righteousness, who was also a priest known to be the best King of Salem and the ancient world.

Jesus knew this clearly, and Jesus explained to John and James that it is not up to him who sits where he means that God chooses, and the priesthood belongs to God. His priesthood belongs to God, and his authority lies within the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And Jesus is obedient to God and His will.

Also, as the priest, Jesus continued to pray to God; Hebrews 5 says that when Jesus was made the righteous priest, he offered prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death. Because of his reverent submission, he was heard and became the source of eternal salvation for all who obeyed him.

This story does not just tell us about his leadership and, once again, how wrong the disciples were, but in this, Jesus calls us to be cautious and always examine our motives, which John and James failed to do.

It must have been puzzling to Jesus as much as for us to see how James, John, and the disciples who became angry at them still had no regard for what Jesus said and how Jesus explained that just before this passage, there was his coming condemnation, humiliation, and death. How easily we are like James and John, blinded by our desires and needs, and fail to understand what Jesus invites us to do and be. We see what we want and not what we don't want to see.

David Howell, one of the commentators on this passage, reminds us that Jesus does not get angry or frustrated with his disciples; he is, instead, generous and patient in explaining things to them, and he said that following Jesus is a means to grace. Following Jesus transforms us through humility and compassion, enabling us to face our limitations, ambitions, and selfish desires instead of meeting our selfish desires and being consumed by the desire for more power and success. Following Jesus is to live for a higher purpose and a new life in God, becoming available for healing and wholeness like Jesus. It can even transform us into eternal life. To live in humility and compassion, seek to do the will of God, and through fervent prayer, not to live in our power and confidence in our ability but to live in God's power, confidence in limitless almighty God, and set free of worries or anxiety for tomorrow.

I think there is power in God's people coming together in humility, love, and prayer. At the conference of almost 200 church leaders, or this morning, when we, the faithful, came together to pray and worship, to center ourselves on God, humble ourselves before God, in repentance and praise. I was reminded that this is our calling: to follow Jesus and to serve God, to be transformed by the power of God, whose love, humility, and gentleness transform our lives to live not for ourselves but to live to a higher purpose that is so that all may know God, and have eternal life. We are called to pray, discern, follow, in humility and compassion, Jesus, live, serve, and follow.