

**Can you drink the cup?**  
**James the Apostle 25.7.10**  
**Acts 11: 27-12:2; Mt 20: 20-28**

Almost exactly 41 years ago- it was 20<sup>th</sup> July 1969- Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin made the historic first moon landing. Before stepping out onto the moon's surface Buzz received the communion bread and wine given him by his local church. He poured the wine into the chalice- and because the gravity on the moon is significantly less than that on earth, the wine swirled and curled its way gracefully up the sides of the cup. The men looked down at planet earth, suspended like a jewel in space- and the wine danced.

'Are you able to drink the cup?' Jesus asks the sons of Zebedee, James and John. And with more enthusiasm than wisdom, they say yes, they are, not actually knowing what on earth they are talking about. They certainly didn't think it would mean persecution and in James' case a violent death. They are thinking in terms of success, concrete rewards, human power and influence. Seats in the cabinet.

Not in my gift, Jesus says. Jesus has no interest in roles and status because he knows they are bad for us. It is not that power is inherently bad, but most of the time human beings don't handle it very well. We use power to protect and promote ourselves, over against others and so power becomes a tool of control. Once inside

any group it is hard to hear anything that demotes us, that might change us, or remove our comfort and false security. There is a terrible tendency in us to protect ourselves first of all. That's why roles and status are bad for us. The other disciples express anger at James and John but I suspect the real reason is because they thought the two were stealing a march on them. It would be laughable if it weren't so near the bone.

I occasionally watch 'Secret Millionaire' and 'Undercover Boss' and am fascinated by the responses of those with power and privilege when they see for themselves the struggles and dedication of those less fortunate. I may be naive but I hope and pray they are permanently changed- one man spoke of learning humility, of being changed by meeting people who have little money or influence but are trying to do good in their work and in their lives. Often there is a desire to empower those who are powerless.

Power rightly used is always for the sake of others. But unless we have some experience of life at the bottom, unless we know what it is to be marginalised, rejected or excluded, or know how much it hurts to hurt, then we are very unlikely to be able to exercise the power that reflects a humble God. If we have no connection with the pain of the world how can we be empathetic? In my own life I spent years outside the church before I heard God's call; an Anglican nun said to me never to be ashamed of that because only those who have been

in the desert understand what it's like and how to lead others out. Put another way, all our experiences, however apparently negative or painful, can be a rich source for our own compassionate service.

Are you able to drink the cup? There is a beautiful phrase in one of the CW prayers- 'we who drink this cup bring life to others.' Life in all its richness, complexity, joy and sorrow. Sorrow is universal; broken families, spiritual confusion, deadening work, sexual unfulfillment, loneliness, heartbreaking illness. And perhaps deepest of all, that haunting fear that we have not become what we wanted to be, have not really lived the life we wished for.

And yet- we each of us have this one life- unique to us- and the opportunity to hold our cup and drink it down. Jesus faced it in the garden of Gethsemane and he prayed: 'if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.' At that point for Jesus there was too much pain, too much suffering. And yet in the end he said 'yes.' I cannot imagine any way he could have said that yes if he had not trusted with all his being in God's love for him, if he did not know the intimacy of profound loving relationship with the creator of the earth, the moon and the stars. And so he did drain the cup to the dregs- the cup of all the sorrow of the world- and it became also the cup of joy, bringing life.

And so it is for us. It is not possible to say our yes to God, and to drink our cup to the bottom, unless we have heard the voice of love. Once and for all let us bury all notions of an angry God, who will punish us if we don't behave in certain ways, of a capricious God who exacts vengeance where he wills, of a God who is powerful in any human understanding of that word. The power is all in the inexhaustible love and the desire to serve us.

Human power, wanting status and control, will never serve us, especially when the chips are down. It is when we recognise we can't do it- we can't forgive, we can't endure, we can't love- we can't change ourselves even when we know we need to- it is beyond us- but we can open ourselves to a different power- the power of the humble and vulnerable Jesus- let his love transform us. Then we can drink the cup.

The 17<sup>th</sup> C poet/priest George Herbert wrote:  
Love is that liqueur sweet and most divine  
which my God feels as blood, but I, as wine.

Wisdom emerges through what we do with our pain. If we become embittered or retreat into ourselves we will not be able to drink the cup of life to the full. If we protect ourselves from further hurt and hide our vulnerability we cannot live fully. If we try to calculate the advantage to ourselves and be certain before we commit then we'll get nowhere. But, if we are able to face and accept what life throws at us- trusting deeply

in God's love and care and sharing both our joys and sorrows rather than hiding them away, then we may learn what spiritual power is all about. Mostly people are unconscious of having it- but it is evident to others. It is a way of being that is able to be grateful not just for the good things that have come our way but for everything; that doesn't forget joy because we are submerged in sorrow; that doesn't just 'make the best of it' but lives with hope and compassion as guiding lights. Often it is seen in those regarded as insignificant in worldly terms- those not trapped in roles and status. Human power always ends in domination-but spiritual power is about transformation- a slower process- but it is God at work not us.

We learn how to handle power when, through God's grace we have the spiritual maturity to know we don't need it for ourselves and care only to use it for the sake of others. Wherever power is used to exclude others from exercising their own God-given authority and gifts that is a denial of the gospel of Jesus. Jesus says to the Pharisees in Mark's gospel (7:9) that we reject the commandment of God in order to keep the tradition.

Reflecting on the worst moments in our own lives we might ask ourselves 'Have I been able to become more loving and sensitive to others because of what has happened?' When we feel we are being crushed like grapes it is hard to believe we will become wine- wine that dances. But if we are truly prepared to drink the

cup we will be drawn into the joy, the love and the intimacy which is God.

In the Methodist liturgy these words are sometimes spoken:

Come to this sacred table,  
not because you must but because you may;  
come, not to declare that you are righteous,  
but that you desire to be true disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ;  
come, not because you are strong,  
but because you are weak;  
not because you have any claim on heaven's rewards,  
but because, in your frailty and sin,  
you stand in constant need of heaven's mercy and help.

Can you drink the cup?

© Christine Bull