Mark 10: 35-45

Advertising and marketing in the UK are big business, worth some billions of pounds every year. Once called, ‘The Hidden Persuaders,’ it uses psychological expertise to persuade us to buy products which we *think* we need in order to have a more satisfying life. It knows how to tweak our hidden desires and emotions and turn material things into fantasies. Because the end product rarely gives us the satisfaction we crave, there is plenty of space for another to come along.

James and John demonstrate the kind of weakness advertisers love to prey on. Psychologically they are programmed to believe that there is always something better round the corner that will satisfy our deepest desires. Having seen Jesus work the crowds so well, the two brothers are convinced that the kingdom of God announced by Jesus is superior to the kingdom of the Romans that presently oppresses them. If only Jesus can liberate them from Rome, all will be well, and their people will be great again. More than that, as friends of Jesus they will be part of the new establishment, the new elite.

Even before the kingdom is established, James and John see an opportunity to gain the highest form of honour and power at the expense of the other disciples. In their culture they would be admired by many for getting their foot in the door first and getting preferential treatment from Jesus, but they would also arouse the envy of many too. Pushy people get on, but they are not necessarily liked. James and John also confuse the role of Jesus with regard to the kingdom. Jesus’ role is to endorse the kingdom; it is not his place to grant honours or positions of authority. God alone can do that.

Jesus’ first response to the two brothers is to clarify once again his role in the formation of the kingdom. He has already warned the disciples three times of the fate that lies before him in Jerusalem, his suffering at the hands of the religious authorities and his ignominious death at the hands of the Romans. But in their desire for self-advancement, they fail to take in his message. Now he challenges them to share his fate by ‘drinking the cup’. In the Scriptures the cup is the cup of suffering, whatever amount God allots to each person in life. If they want glory, says Jesus, they will have to imitate him in his fate. Yet imitating Jesus is a gift one gives of oneself; it is not part of a transaction expecting a specific reward in return. The reward remains in the hand of God; known to God alone.

Once their motives are out in the open the rest of the group become very angry, because the truth is that they too are looking for the same advantages for themselves and their families. This allows Jesus to speak further about the nature of the kingdom of God by comparing how things

are with the kingdoms of the ancient world and how it will be when people join the kingdom. In the new world of the kingdom there will be a great reversal of roles. Honour, power and greatness will belong to those who serve, not those who rule, and the greatest will be the slave, not the slave owner or authoritarian ruler who can do what he likes to his underlings without being accountable to anyone.

To James, John and the other disciples, and no less so to us, this implies a whole new culture - not a tinkering at the edges of the status quo but a radical resetting of the ways we relate to one another. In suffering crucifixion Jesus, who in life exercised an authority unlike that of the religious leaders of the time, was to die a death common to slaves, thus embodying in himself this new culture and the price we have to pay if we enter it.

Jesus describes his work as offering his life as a ransom, to set many others free. Since the war in Gaza, we have been familiar with the bargaining that has surrounded the freeing of hostages. A small number of civilians can be seen by their fellow citizens as ‘worth’ more than many prisoners. A King will be ‘worth’ more than a multitude of ‘ordinary’ persons. By freely offering himself in service, and giving his life for many, the death of Jesus reveals his true worth for the salvation of the world. Amen