

Are You Able?

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 21st Sunday after Pentecost, October 16, 1988. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 53:7-12; Psalm 35:17-28; Hebrews 4:14-16; *Mark 10:35-45*.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

"Are ye able," said the Master,
"To be crucified with Me?"
"Yea," the sturdy dreamers answered,
"To the death we follow Thee:"

That's confidence, isn't it? Here are two of the first disciples of Jesus. They've just been told that the road they're taking is going to lead to his trial, torture, and death. He tells them that he's going to have to drain the cup of suffering and to be baptized in his own blood. He'll be condemned. They'll mock him, spit on him, beat him, and then kill him. And then he asks them: "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I'm baptized?" And they answer, "We are able."

These are the words that leaped at me as I read this passage early last week. When we hear this story about James and John coming to Jesus with their request that they should have the places of honour in the coming kingdom, our first reaction is to be shocked at their arrogance and insensitivity. But at the Bible Breakfast Bunch on Thursday morning when we studied this passage I got some new insights into it from the people who were there. I began to see James and John in a little different light. When Jesus asked them if they were able to be crucified with him, they were expressing tremendous confidence in their ability to do what Jesus wanted them to do.

Could we answer Jesus with that kind of confidence? Most of us here this morning are church members. Like the new members who stood before us this morning most of you stood before the congregation one day and

made solemn promises to trust, obey and follow Jesus as long as you live. How confident are you of your ability to keep those promises? Are you able to obey his word and to show his love to your life's end? Are you able to continue in the covenant God made with you in your baptism? Unlike James and John, don't we want to say: "I don't know. I'm not sure. I want to, but I don't really think I'm able." But James and John answered boldly, "We are able."

Were they wrong to answer so boldly? Well, you could make a good case for their being wrong. St Mark tells us what happened when the decisive moment came with the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He tells how poorly the disciples met the test. "They all -- including James and John -- forsook him and fled." But does that mean that they should never have uttered the words, "We are able"?

I personally think James and John were right to answer Jesus with bold confidence. In fact, Jesus as much as confirms this when he said to them, "The cup that I drink you *will* drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you *will* be baptized." In other words, "Yes, James and John! You *will* be able." I wonder if our inclination to dismiss James and John as a couple of brash, boastful young men comes from our own unwillingness to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to Jesus; does it come from our own lack of nerve, our fearfulness and timidity in following Jesus? Does it come from our own lack of confidence in the power of the Risen Christ to empower us to do his will here on earth?

But you say, Ted, were James & John a little bit arrogant, flashy, cocky...?

It's important to distinguish between Christian confidence and arrogance. There *is* such a thing, unfortunately, as religious arrogance; the arrogance of those who behave as though they alone were in possession of a private line to God, or the arrogance of the church or sect that claims

The arrogance of someone who believes he/she has been able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

to be in sole possession of religious truth.⁴ In the face of that kind of arrogance and presumption St Paul says, "Let whoever thinks they stand take heed lest they fall." But true Christian confidence is far different from arrogance. It's a confidence that rests, not in our own strength of character, but in Christ -- *his* character, *his* power, *his* ability.

When Jesus asks us if we're able to drink his cup of suffering and to be baptized with his baptism few of us would be so presumptuous as to say, "Yes, Lord, I'm just the person you need, brave, courageous, and bold!" That would be arrogance. I don't think that's what James and John were saying with the words, "We are able". It was rather: "Here we are; you know what we are -- just plain ordinary, fallible human beings, never quite able to be what we really want to be -- but when we're in your presence there's something about you that inspires confidence and makes us feel that we really are able."

Do we behave as Christians today as though we have a Lord who is truly greater than any of the secular powers that surround us? As I listen to the voices of Christians who live under totalitarian regimes they seem to be saying to us here in America, "Where's your confidence in Christ? Where's your confidence in His coming kingdom?" That's what I hear from people like Alexander Solzhenitsyn or Allan Boesak of South Africa.

Or think of people in the past who were able to stand up against the forces of evil. People like Bishop Bergrav of Norway who was told by his Gestapo interrogators, "We will have you shot", and he simply replied, "Go ahead. Shoot me -- and what will you do then?" That's Christian confidence. Or think of Bishop Polycarp who lived in ancient Turkey during the days of the Roman Empire. He was dragged before the authorities and told to deny Christ upon pain of death. And the bishop boldly answered,

"For 86 years I've served Christ and he's never denied me. How can I now deny him?" That's Christian confidence. Or think of the apostle Paul who wrote, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." That's Christian confidence. It's not arrogance.

So often we Christians have a defeatist attitude. We feel that there's nothing we can do about war or poverty or injustice or racism. There's nothing we can do about the drug problem. So often Christian young people don't see how they could ever be able to live out their faith in Christ in high school or in the armed services or at college. ^{*} We lack confidence to share our faith in the Risen Christ with friends and neighbors. "We aren't able", we say. So often we sit around and wring our hands. "There's nothing I can do about my marriage or my kids." God gives us a vision of what he wants us to do as a church and so often we say, "Ah, we're not able to do that. It costs too much money. We've tried it before and we weren't able." Where's the Christian confidence of James and John who said, "We *are* able."

Don't judge James and John by what they did when Jesus was arrested, how they forsook him. Rather look at them after the Resurrection, and after the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon them and the whole church. Look at John standing up to the authorities who had forbidden him to speak the name of Jesus. He says, "Is it right in God's eyes for us to obey you rather than God? Judge for yourselves. We cannot possibly give up speaking of things we have seen and heard." Yes, with faith in the Risen Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit John was able.

Or look at James . . .
In A.D. 42 James drank the cup that Jesus drank and was baptized with the baptism with which Jesus was baptized. James was martyred. He was able to be crucified with Christ. To the death he followed Christ.

*Temptations
1 Cor 10:13
God will not
allow you to
be tempted
above what
you are able
but will with
temptation also
make a way
to escape*

to be my faithful despite till your life end!

When Christ looks at you and asks, "Are you able?" what's your answer? If we look inside at our weaknesses, our doubts our fears the answer will be, "No, I'm not able". But if like James and John we look at Jesus and feel those eyes of understanding and compassion and trust fixed on us, then we'll give the answer he expects,

"Lord, we are able"-- our spirits are Thine;
Remold them- make us like Thee, divine.
Thy guiding radiance above us shall be
A beacon to God, to love and loyalty.

Amen

Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling,
and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy,
To the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever.
Amen.