

# Drinking the Cup

a sermon preached on the

## Feast of St James

Sunday 26 July 2009

at

### St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lection: Jeremiah 45:1-5, Acts 11:27-12:3, Matthew 20:20-28

At the heart of God, Christian teaching affirms again and again, is love. In fact, most people, Christian or otherwise, can all agree with that. But the essence of God's loving, Christian teaching *specifically claims*, is sacrifice. On this matter we struggle. The reality of sacrifice in everyday life is perfectly comprehensible to everyone, for even the most ordinary aspects of life are sustained by the dynamic of sacrifice – no relationship could be more than fleeting or superficial without sacrifice. But the moment we begin to talk about this reality in relation to God and humanity and salvation the little vessel of the church founders on treacherous rocks. And the idea of religious sacrifice has fostered all manner of profound and appalling abuses in Christian people – and may be the greatest stumbling block to the mission of the church to the world, albeit largely un-admitted by the church. Perhaps there is even some connection between this fact and the surge of emotional engagement with the Anzac myth. Anyway, there being entire libraries on this subject, I will not attempt to solve this problem, you'll be relieved to hear.

Suffice to remain with our patron saint for this day, and the lectionary's gospel text, and, above all, the one and only essential act that we Christians do at the Altar whenever we gather. Saint James the apostle was the first recorded martyr of the fledgling church, executed on the orders of King Herod Agrippa some time in the early forties of that first century. "Are you able," Jesus had asked him, "to drink the cup that I am about to drink?"<sup>1</sup> Not so long after this event recorded in today's gospel Jesus will say to James and the others, "Drink from this cup, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant."<sup>2</sup> There is simply no way of speaking about Christian faith except in the language of sacrifice. At the core of the Christian revelation is the reality of the sacrificial love of God in Christ, who gives his life as a ransom: "The Son of Man," Jesus informed his disciples just moments prior to this exchange with James and John and their protective Jewish mama, "will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death..."<sup>3</sup> The supreme symbol of the church, the one essential sign of the work of Christ, now carefully located at the centre of church buildings thanks to the efforts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century liturgical movement, is the Altar of broken bread and poured wine, the Table of sacrifice. Here, at the Altar, Christ asks you and me, again and again, "Can *you* drink the cup that I am about to drink?"

And I want to say 'Yes!' For I like the *idea* of saying 'Yes'. And my religious life and persona are dependent upon my Yes to this cup. But like James and his 'son-of-thunder' brother, my answer to Jesus' question is hasty, not carefully considered, and, most critically of all, is given out of a profound unconsciousness and self-centredness. And I had no idea what I was doing, like them, and I drank from the cup, and my eyes remained un-seeing and my ears remained un-hearing.<sup>4</sup> And I suppose the astounding thing about the heart of Jesus and the love of God and what we call the *εὐαγγέλιον* *evangellion* is that my un-seeing and my un-hearing are actually no barrier to the One who gives. Christ the gracious banquet-host welcomes me to the Table, in spite of my lack of sight and my deafness, and my self-centredness.

And then, precipitated by a rich variety of revelatory experiences, comes a moment when I begin to see the cup, as if for the first time, in spite of the fact that I may have drunk from this sacred vessel many times. I begin to hear Jesus' words, words which he has been speaking all along but which my deafness and

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 20:22b

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 26:27b,28a

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 20:18b

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 13:101-5

unconsciousness and self-centredness prevented from seeing and hearing. And I find that I am shocked and appalled, because suddenly I see that *this really is the same cup which Jesus drinks!* I might have thought that “remembrance” meant simply identifying with a 2000 year old prophet and Messiah, and believing in some things he and his church taught. Instead, a mere historical fact, a 2000 year old relic which powerful institutions fight about - and unconscious crowds rally around just as crowds rally around national flags and football teams - shockingly transfigures in the present moment. *The cup which Jesus drinks, the cup of suffering, the cup of sacrificial transformation, is suddenly real in the present moment!* And I hear Jesus’ words as if for the first time: Can you drink the same cup that I am about to drink?

And then, in spite of all my grand beliefs, I hear myself repulsed, repelled, recoiling from this awful and fearsome Thing before me, in which I become terrified that I might drown. And I want to shout ‘No! I cannot drink this cup!’ No! I do not want this cup of suffering. I do not want to share in Christ’s sacrificial self-offering, his self-emptying. <sup>5</sup> For Christ’s cup that he must drink contains everything within him which would separate him from his deepest self, from the Father – the triumphalistic and imperialistic idea of Messiah; <sup>6</sup> that part of him which would gladly take up the powers to change stone into bread, which would grasp at self-preserving and supreme power; <sup>7</sup> his own desire to be a showman wonderworker; <sup>8</sup> the lure of success and ‘results’; <sup>9</sup> the comforting regression to family and tribal boundaries; <sup>10</sup> the fear of ego annihilation; <sup>11</sup> All these temptations, and more, exist within Jesus. All these he must sacrifice, in order to be truly completed in his humanity and his divinity. And this is the reality of Christ’s cup, the cup offered to James and the other disciples, and disciples of every age.

And to drink this cup is to know the most intense and total experience of alone-ness, loneliness. And I do not want to experience and sacrifice what is dark and troubling within me which immerses me in the searing loneliness of Jesus. For Jesus is the ‘pioneer and perfecter of our faith’ <sup>12</sup> for the very reason that he embodies, and points the way, the necessary way by which each and every person must go in order to enter the narrow gate, <sup>13</sup> to the lonely and singular path to *τελος telos*, completion in God. But I do not want to make “The highest sacrifice of love [which] is the acceptance of loneliness.” <sup>14</sup> I want to turn from this cup and flee from Christ’s Table, and I know myself to be very afraid.

The astonishing thing is that in spite of all our un-seeing and un-hearing, and in spite of our shock and fear and timidity when we do catch a glimpse, Christ continues to offer the same sacrificial cup of salvation he offered to James and his brother: ‘Can you drink the cup that I am about to drink?’ And the good news is that, by the grace of God, and like the apostle James, and in spite of our small selves, we are able to drink from the cup that Jesus drinks. And by this astonishing grace, little by little, we are brought to the *πληρωμα plēroma*, fullness, the completeness, of our humanity and divinity – and thereby truly serve God and God’s people. <sup>15</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Philippians 2:6-8

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 16:21-23

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 4:1-10

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 14:22-24, John 6:15

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 16:24-28

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 10:37-38, 12:46-50

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 26:38,39,42,44

<sup>12</sup> Hebrews 12:2

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 7:13-14

<sup>14</sup> Kunkel F, *Creation Continues: A Psychological Interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew*, New York: Paulist Press, 1987, p216.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 20:26-28