

The Feast of St. James, the Induction of the Reverend Doctor Sharon Smith as Vicar of St. Catherine's Capilano

"We are able" – Matthew 20:20-28

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Mothers want the best for their children. Mothering can be a force of nature, demanding change, improving lots. The mother in today's gospel is no exception. She kneels before Jesus and asks him a huge favour. "What do you want?" he says. She says, "Say that my sons will sit at your left and right hand in your kingdom. And he says, "You don't know what you're asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I'm about to drink?" And they say to him, "We are able."

Are you able to drink the cup? We are able. This is the question and this is the response in our gospel story. For the rest of this sermon, I'd like to adapt this call and response a little. When I ask: "Are you able to drink the cup?" As you are willing say, "We are able, with God's help." Let's try a quick run-through.

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Now I wonder what your first responses were when you heard Jesus asking two of his closest disciples and their mother whether they can drink the cup and they reply: We are able. Is it a rueful chuckle? A shudder? A pondering? I had a few responses but surprisingly mixed in with them all was respect. Respect for Jesus asking the real questions, and respect for him bringing his followers ambitions into a new focus. Respect for the disciples and their willingness to say yes to something they didn't fully understand, respect even for their laying bare of their deepest desires to Jesus. As you think about your desires for this parish, for yourselves, and for this new vicar, as you think about your longing for this parish to fulfill its part for the kingdom of God –

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What is the cup? When Jesus talks about the cup, he was drawing on a long tradition in scripture and in the wider culture that used the image of the cup to talk about one's fate. When he says, "Are you able to drink this cup? He is asking,

“Are you willing to share my fate? The cup for Jesus meant the trial and crucifixion, it meant Jesus’ own struggle to drink the cup, it meant the leap into the unknown of the resurrection. He prays to his abba, “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want.” The cup is a strange gift. It represents a deep fulfillment of purpose and it asks us to make a choice. Jesus was given a choice. We and all the disciples are given a choice to drink his cup. In this diocese, we believe each parish has a unique purpose or fate. The Spirit has given St Catherine’s some particular gifts and has given Sharon some particular gifts so that those gifts might be poured out for the transformation of the world. The Spirit holds before you a unique purpose in alignment with Jesus’ way of death and resurrection.

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If the cup represents deep purpose or fate. The cup is also the cup of suffering for love. All the commentary I read highlighted this reality of the cup. Now this parish is no stranger to suffering and I’m sure all our lives have been touched by it. And when we love, we are opened to suffering in a different way. Jesus freely accepts that his utter commitment and love for God’s world will come with solidarity with its suffering. And yet because Jesus drank the cup of suffering for love to the dregs, the cup given to us to drink has been transformed. Are you willing to allow Jesus’ solidarity with you to transform your suffering, not to erase or forget it, but to ferment it into a new wine?

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The cup is the cup of fate or deep purpose. The cup is the cup of fermented suffering for love. The cup is the sign of a covenant. This is the language Jesus uses at the last supper with his disciples. According to Matthew’s tradition, Jesus takes the cup, gives thanks, and says, “drink from it all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant. Covenant meant a contract between two parties with promises and obligations. Throughout scripture God makes covenants with people and the people let down their side. The cup that Jesus drinks is God’s costly way of showing that not even death, nor the world’s letting down, will stop him from keeping his promise of love and new life for the world. And what he’s actually

doing by inviting us to drink it is not so much asking us to keep our side of the covenant as it is inviting us to join Jesus in God's side of the covenant. We who drink the cup aren't trying to keep up a bargain with God. We're drinking to become who we are in Jesus: a walking, sweating, breathing, resurrecting God in love with this time and this place given to us. We are an organ of God's living and lasting covenant with the world. That's the church's fate or purpose. And here's the marvelous thing, when Jesus asks James, John, and their mother: Are you able to drink the cup, and they say: "We are able." Jesus affirms them. "You will drink the cup." When you say: "We are able." Jesus deeply affirms you. You will drink the cup. You are able. And the life of Jesus in the Spirit will warm you as much and more than wine in your gut. What deep respect I have for all of you taking this next step in our common life together.

Ponder the question: Will you drink the cup? Remember who asks you, who promises you, who affirms you, who warms you. Know that you will drink the cup, always, with God's help.