

Be careful what you ask for – you might get it in a way you didn't expect. We're now hosting a group of meditators at the monastery from the World Community of Christian Meditation and the theme for the weekend is Time and Eternity – or more precisely 'All time is eternally present'. I personally find eternity a little daunting, because I don't really understand it whether as a future or present reality. As a future reality I can't envisage something going on and on forever; as a present reality I can't escape from the perception of time as just one thing after another. These of course are two sides of the same coin. So my focus is limited as it is with the disciples James and John in today's gospel passage. They don't really know what they are asking, because they don't yet really know who Jesus is. They think of him as one with the power to grant them positions of eternal glory but ironically demand this of him as if he were their servant. The words in today's translation do not do this justice 'Master we want you to do us a favour'; in the words of the Revised Standard Version – always closer to the original text – it is 'Teacher we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you'. And Jesus wisely doesn't say 'Yes, of course', as we often say to someone asking for a favour, but answers with a question 'What do you want me to do for you?' and so remains in charge of their request. Yes he is in a way their servant, at the service of us all, but not in the way we might envisage or hope. In this sense he really is his own master. And, hopefully, without confusing(?) this too much, this reminded me of the discussions which arose in our Zoom lectio session yesterday for which I chose the classic text from Ecclesiastes beginning with:

'There is a season for everything, a time for every occupation under heaven,  
a time for giving birth,  
a time for dying...'

And so on. And this evoked a comment from one participant that it's all God's time and God's choice of whatever happens, while I was thinking: yes, God is indeed in charge of all this but not in a way which excludes our ability and need to choose also. Indeed, one way of reading the text of "there is a time for this and a time for that" is that of our simply not being able to do two things at once – we have then to choose. And this is probably what is going on in Jesus' simple interplay with his two disciples for it is his turn now to ask a further question:

'Can you drink the cup that I must drink or be baptised with the baptism with which I must be baptised?'

To which they say 'We can,' blithely unaware it seems of just what it is that they have just said yes to – suffering and death. In a way their lack of understanding crystallises the lack of understanding of all the disciples after hearing Christ's prediction of his own suffering and death, and resurrection, for the third time. This should give us pause for thought over our own understanding of what it means to be a Christian. It's not just a means of easy access to God, so many of our prayers said with the expectation that God will always carry them out. In Christ God is indeed asking us what we want and it's perhaps a blessing that we do not fully understand for, if we do indeed want what God wants, what we'll get is an invitation to enter ever more fully into the pattern of suffering, death and resurrection which marks all life as of God. It's your choice, or so you may think. We could reframe the whole question as – who is choosing whom?

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