

There is a certain irony in the fact of naming James, the brother of John and Zebedee, as James the Great, to distinguish him from St. James the Less, the son of Alphaeus, reinforcing the idea that apostles, and all the rest of us, can be ranked in a certain hierarchical order; just the sort of order Jesus, and Paul in his letter to the Corinthians, are trying to overturn. But, of course, he's 'great' in martyrdom, in that witness of total service to the point of death; in the promise held out to him and to his brother John in this passage from Matthew's gospel; a passage worthy, in its turn, to be likened to that sense of irony which suffuses the gospel of John, for the two apostles are offered a cup instead of a throne and it's not clear whether they accept the cup of suffering still with the intention of sitting at Jesus' right and left hand in the kingdom; a hope he then dashes by saying it's not for him to give. What they've said 'yes' to is the certainty of suffering in the service of others. Where it leads exactly they are not to know. And isn't this so often our experience, too? We serve, but it doesn't seem to be getting us anywhere. Indeed, things often seem to get worse. One suffers illness or abuse; friends die; the rich get richer – and so on. But the service we are called to, the service we offer, is of a different order altogether to the service which wins respectability or power- the sort of service, perhaps, that even the other apostles are also tempted by, and which makes them so annoyed with James and John for trying to get there first. No, this service is ennobling in quite a different respect. It's not a subtle way of seeking power or of cultivating either a real or false servility but of entering into the very life of God: a way of love which only God has the power to give: a way of love which only hearts empty of self can receive.

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