

Jesus tells parables to present truth in an oblique manner so that only those seeking truth will understand. Occasionally, he's more direct. Immediately before this episode in today's Gospel, he tells the disciples for the third time of the manner of the death he has to undergo in Jerusalem and of his resurrection, but the disciples remain obtuse, dull of understanding. For here they are arguing among themselves over who is to be the greatest. If they've understood the fact of his death, they have not understood the nature of his life and the meaning of the Resurrection. Paul, in contrast, seems to understand the meaning of both only too well. The cup of suffering offered to James and John has been his from the beginning of his apostleship. The suffering is in service to others, that they may come to know the true nature of Christ, the Son of Man who came to give his life for all. This is not then an invitation to suffering for suffering's sake but delineates the nature of the conflict between good and evil. Between suffering for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of others, and the suffering that ultimately comes to those who have only sought to serve themselves.

“Indeed, while we are still alive, we are consigned to our death every day for the sake of Jesus, so that in our mortal flesh the life of Jesus too may be openly shown. So death is at work in us, but life in you.”

Paul suffers like Christ so that others might have life. Like Jesus's predictions of his Passion and Death, it's a dramatic statement of the struggle we all have to undergo if we are to have life. It's a drama that takes place every day.

We are being trained in the small events of each day, those many minor irritations that life in community necessarily entails, to seek the good of the other before seeking what we think is best for ourselves, the ambition we all have to get our own way. The good of the other may entail a direct admonition. I'm going to tell you where you are going wrong, but more often it's done in that beautiful indirect way which Jesus shows in his response today. I can't give you seats at my right hand or left. That is not for me to decide, but you can certainly share in my cup of suffering.

He's more direct with the other disciples to quell their indignation, that seed of discontent which can quickly destroy a community. No, ask yourself what is best for the good of all - what is the best way to bring your erring brother or sister back to their true selves without leading them or yourself further into sin?

We are all earthenware jars, all in need of grace if we are to live the Christian life of death and Resurrection.

Br John Mayhead
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour