

**Matthew 20:17-34**  
**None so blind ...**

**Listen, believe and see**

**Money talks**, we say. Just this week I had through the post the latest edition of the magazine that gets sent out to people who worked in the chemistry department of the university I attended, **Chem@Cam**. The front page picture, and the first article inside described how what was, back in my day, just “the Chemistry Department”, is going to be renamed the **Yusuf Hamied Department of Chemistry**, in recognition of a substantial input of money from, yes, you guessed it, Yusuf Hamied.

Hamied was a student there himself back in the late 1950's, and he went on to have a highly successful career in chemistry. It's only fair to note that he has ploughed back substantial amounts of money into various educational and healthcare causes, over the years. In the early years of this century, his company made available a treatment for HIV/AIDS patients for under a dollar a day, and that has made a huge impact in the poorer “developing countries”.

But he has also been very substantially *recognised* for his philanthropy, too. Not just a department and a chair of chemistry now bearing his name, but he has also received an honorary Doctorate of Science from Cambridge, and honorary Fellowships of the Royal Society of Chemistry and, the absolute top honour, of the **Royal Society**. FRS!

I'm not at all suggesting that he has done all of this good stuff simply for the recognition that it gets him, as if it were buying prestige. I'm sure that he has been doing this kind of stuff from honourable motivations. But we also realise that this *is* the way that this world works.

I mean, I've not particularly disgraced my old chemistry department, but I'm sure they would never have even considered naming it after me. Why would they? That's not the way the world works.

See, we all tune into so much of “how the world works”. We're very largely programmed for it. Power and “recognition” 2000 years ago worked in very much the same way that it does nowadays, too, as we can see from that passage we just read. So the people in power feel entitled to **throw their weight around**.

***“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.”***

(Matthew 20:25)

And Jesus will have to comment again on the desire for recognition, too, before too long, when the disciples row once again over precisely the point that Jesus is bringing them up on in this passage.

***And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors.”***

(Luke 22:25)

They like to have people looking *up* at them. They like to have people *under* them, to bask in feelings of superiority and .. maybe “greatness”, but at least greatness.

But Jesus has to speak forcefully to his disciples here, once again. Yes, that absolutely *is* the way the world works. But it is not the way that *his Kingdom* is going to work.

***“It shall not be so among you.”***

(Matthew 20:26)

Because **despite Jesus’ repetition and clarification concerning the cross, his closest followers remain largely blind to how the Kingdom will function.**

And yet, curiously, ironically, I think I’d even say, the chapter ends with two blind men who *do* see how the Kingdom works ... and you might even say they “get it” better than the official disciples do!

Jesus restates his future path (17-19)

A woman asks a *big* favour (20-28)

Two blind men *get* it! (29-34)

- **Jesus restates his future path (17-19)**

Now we’re picking up things here that we left off back before Christmas, so it’s probably best to remember where we’re at in Matthew’s gospel. We’ve already had a lot of Jesus’ teaching, and certainly most of his miracles. But I think you can probably see something of a turning point for the whole book in chapter 16, starting with that innocent-sounding question from Jesus,

***Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”***

(Matthew 16:13)

And Peter replies soon afterwards with his own - or perhaps an agreed summary of the disciples’ collective - perception:

***Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”***

(Matthew 16:16)

And you might remember that I described that as getting the **job title** right, but without a whole lot of understanding of the **job description**. So Jesus now needs to instruct this little group of followers about what being this “Christ” really is. Matthew summarised it for us.

***From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.***

(Matthew 16:21)

Notice that mention of Jerusalem there. It can't have escaped the disciples' notice that they are indeed heading in that direction, perhaps rather gradually, but definitely. We're not told very exactly how long the events of chapter 20 span over - the "then" in v20 is really very indefinite.

But when we finally turn the page into chapter 21, it somehow reminds me of the good old days in **West End Departmental Stores** in Redruth as a kid, in the run-up to Christmas. Does anyone else remember the **Christmas Caves** there? Check out the **Nostalgic Redruth** Facebook page, Charles Sibthorpe occasionally posts pictures of them there.

So I remembered as a kid going down through the various scenes that had been concocted at that end of the big upstairs room. But after going through a few, I started to wonder .... Are we at **Father Christmas** yet? There would come a time when we would go around one more corner, and, *goodness*, that's it! We've come through all the caves. Here's the guy with the red suit and white beard again.

So yes, turn over the page to Matthew 21, and you're at the start of that last week of Jesus' human life. There's what we call "**The Triumphal Entry**"

***And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"***

(Matthew 21:9)

So in this chapter 20, we're at some of the last scenes and snippets that Matthew records for us, before that climactic final week. And still Jesus needs to teach them again that it's Jerusalem lying ahead of them.

***And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, ...***

(Matthew 20:17)

But it's not just that Jerusalem is ahead; it's what will happen at Jerusalem. Just as Jesus had already said:

***"See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death ..."***

(Matthew 20:18)

But there's a bit more detail here this time. Not just the implication that Jesus will be handed over to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, but - see that word **condemn** there - that implies a formal trial.

And Jesus had already told them about his facing death. But now he finally tells his disciples the awful manner of his death. The preliminaries are horrible enough, but this was regarded as the ultimate deterrent, the worst possible fate,

reserved for the worst possible types of criminals: crucifixion.

**“... and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day.”**

(Matthew 20:18-19)

Yes, of course, the specific Gentiles would be the Romans. The Sanhedrin could pronounce a sentence of death, but it would still be down to the Roman occupying forces to ratify and execute the sentence ... and, in this case, the victim.

And yet, Jesus still insists, *not even that kind of death* will prove to be his end: **he will be raised on the third day.**

And Matthew now just lets that statement hang. What are the disciples going to make of it *this* time, when they have heard the full and terrible detail of what was lying ahead?

Folks, let me dangle a question in front of you now, too, before moving on. This stuff about the Cross. Do you see that simply as a description of what *did* happen? Or do you see it as a description of what *had to* happen, if you and I are going to be set free from our sins, and invited to enter Jesus's Kingdom?

...

- **A woman asks a *big* favour (20-28)**

But Matthew continues to narrate.

***Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something.***

(Matthew 20:20)

I've met some people over the years who just love to have some information they want to dangle in front of you. "Can I tell you something?" they say. Just savouring that moment of thinking that they know something that you don't, and desperate for you to ask them to reveal it.

But this woman coming to Jesus is *not* doing that. She is asking permission to ask, as is proper when in the presence of, for example, royalty. A king might not be in the mood to be entreated for favours. Or I might on occasion turn to Jenny and say, *Can I ask you a question?* - implication being that it's a rather bigger question than just "Do you want a **cup of coffee**"? Is now a convenient time, or when would be?

The "sons of Zebedee", by the way, are James and John, two of Jesus innermost circle of disciples along with Peter. And it's quite possible, if you check out other bits of the Gospels, that this woman is sister to Jesus' mother. Perhaps she is wanting to use some of the leverage that might be thought to give her. Because, after all, that is the way the world works, isn't it? "Blood is thicker than

water”, we say. Anyway, Jesus gives her permission. Quite encouragingly.

***And he said to her, “What do you want?”***

(Matthew 20:21)

So she asks.

***She said to him, “Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.”***

(Matthew 20:21)

Oh, right, she’s looking out for her sons. Yes, that’s the way the world does work, too. *Oh, it’s not for me, but for someone close to me. I wouldn’t dream of asking for MYSELF - that would be so self-centred.* But somehow, asking on behalf of James and John, maybe that’s more acceptable.

But actually, it’s *not* just a mum secretly asking on behalf of her boys. The boys are in on it too. It’s masked by the modern English “you”, but it’s clear from Jesus’ response that, well, maybe they haven’t put Mum up to this, but they are well aware what she is going to be asking Jesus for, and they haven’t tried to stop her. The next “you”s are *plural*. All three of them are way out of their depth here.

***Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking.”***

(Matthew 20:22)

Actually, let’s be fair. There’s quite a bit of faith in this request. Perhaps James and John remembered something Jesus had said not so long ago:

***Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”***

(Matthew 19:28)

And perhaps Mum had come to hear of that. But had she heard, or remembered, or even been told, what came after those words from Jesus?

***“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”***

(Matthew 19:30)

And Jesus went on to tell that parable that we have at the start of chapter 20, that strange one about the labourers in the vineyard ... the ones who worked the whole day and the ones who scarcely had time to change into their work clothes all getting the same payment at the end of the day ... to illustrate that particular point:

***“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” So the last will be first, and the first last.”***

(Matthew 20:15-16)

No, Jesus’ Kingdom does not work the way the world does. Things are turned upside down. It’s not about merit, but mercy. So that kind of calculation about who’s

going to get the top spots in this Kingdom ...

***“... one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.”***

(Matthew 20:21)

No, that's just not how it works! That is only how *this* world insists that it has to be. Yes, James and John and their mother are to be commended for believing that despite was was coming up at Jerusalem - possibly only a week or two away - what Jesus said about being raised again and coming to institute a Kingdom ... yes, *that's good that you believe that!* But you are carrying over from *this* world ways of thinking that just do not belong there.

And folks, that is not an uncommon thing to do. Do you remember Sadducees arguing *against* there being any kind of resurrection, because - they presumed - marriage carries over into glory? (If you're not familiar with the story, hang in there, it's only a couple of chapters ahead!)

***“In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her.”***

(Matthew 22:28)

But no, says Jesus in response to that, too. That's just *this*-worldly thinking. Heaven and glory and the Kingdom of God, that's the ultimate “**thinking outside the box**”. And therefore ...

***But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.”***

(Matthew 22:29)

And we get it wrong, if we think that heaven is primarily about a reunion with people we have loved. Or if we see it is something like **Spring Harvest** or the **Grace Baptist Assembly** going on for ever - you might even be a bit relieved about that!

So if there are better positions and worse positions in the Kingdom of God, we shall be sufficiently changed that it won't matter to us. If - picking up another of Jesus' parables - I have five cities, *only* five cities to rule, but you have ten, I will be delighted on your behalf. And you won't look down on me.

So ...vying for the top positions ... what does that show apart from total misunderstanding of how things will work when Jesus is finally and fully and publicly acclaimed as Lord? So no, it is entirely right that even though there is some faith in the request, there is also serious misunderstanding, too.

***Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking.”***

(Matthew 20:22)

And there is the distinct possibility that James and John, whether *they* cooked up this plan to get the prime positions, or whether it was their Mum ... they just don't realise the potential cost of that road, either.

**“Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?”**

(Matthew 20:22)

And maybe in the brothers' answer, too, there is faith and there is ignorance.

**They said to him, “We are able.”**

(Matthew 20:22)

And maybe that is why they do not receive a rebuke from Jesus. Perhaps he is seeing their faith, that they want to stand by him, that they think that that path of suffering *is* worth the travelling, if he will be with them and going before them. But they still need correction. No, it *doesn't* work that way.

**He said to them, “You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”**

(Matthew 20:23)

But we are then brought down to earth with a bump again, when, however it happened, the rest of the disciples get to hear about this private conversation.

**And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers.**

(Matthew 20:24)

And we just so understand that attitude, too, don't we? We would very likely be the same. But look at who is saying this. These are the remaining ten of the twelve who have already been promised immense privilege. They are also included in that

**“... you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, ...”**

(Matthew 19:28)

... but to think that they might only be numbers 3 to 12 in that group incenses them. And perhaps what really gets to them, just possibly, is that James and John beat them to that attempt to secure **pole position**.

But no, says Jesus. All of this is just the world's way of thinking. All of this jostling for position or pre-eminence, for kudos, for admiration, for superiority ... it's just the polar opposite of how *his* Kingdom is going to work. So he speaks to the group once again, pointing out how things must be different for them.

**But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.”**

(Matthew 20:25)

Those two sets of words that I've highlighted there both have a single Greek word stuck on the start, in the original version, meaning **down**. It is about taking advantage of an elevated position, looking down on, pressing down on, making sure that others know their place - *lower down*.

That's how it is in the *world*, says Jesus. And we all know this and see this in history and politics. The people in charge struggle to maintain their position. The people *not* in charge chafe against it. But ...

***“It shall not be so among you.”***

(Matthew 20:26)

Things in *my* Kingdom do not work that way. And notice now that what Jesus says here implies that the Kingdom is not just “heaven”, that eventual place, but is to be evident in the day to day of Christian discipleship *this side* of glory, too. We might still live in this world - and think too much in the way of this world, too, no doubt. But we must start to live in a way which starts to make it evident that there is a colony of *heaven* growing here. There are to be different attitudes and ways of doing things.

***“But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ...”***

(Matthew 20:26-27)

Folks, do you see taking on some role in the church as being an opportunity to serve your brothers and sisters? In fact, do you see participation in a church as being about serving, or about having *your* needs and preferences catered for? If you were to move to another town, and needed to choose which of several churches you would associate with, what would your criteria be?

They're got a good (**something**) group - I want that for me / my family  
They've got a good **teaching ministry** - saves me thinking for myself  
They've got **wonderful facilities** - I need a comfy chair

Basically, do we go as potential consumers - what's in it for us? Or as servants - how can I contribute? Are we wanting to become greater by becoming lesser?

***“But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ...”***

(Matthew 20:26-27)

And if you reply, all so nobly, that you're *not* actually after greatness of any kind, let me point you to how Jesus finished this *ad hoc* lesson. This different way of looking at things isn't just optional. You can't even say it's an alternative, upside-down kind of rat race, still really all focussing on just a different kind of greatness.

No, it's a way of thinking and living that you cannot call yourself a disciple of Jesus Christ if you reject, because it is the way *he himself* lived. And died. And rose.

***“... even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”***

(Matthew 20:28)

See how, once again, how we live, with Jesus Christ as our example, is based upon how we believe, with Jesus Christ as our Saviour. There is no way that the Christian life can ever escape from that cross of Christ. He sets the pace. He calls the tune. The cross first. The crown to follow.

And *he* pays the price for our sins, and dies. And *we*, when we believe, are brought from death to life.

*Bearing sin and scoffing rude / In my place condemned he stood  
Sealed my pardon with his blood / Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*

The *promised* Saviour, the *promised* ransom of many:

***... he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.***

(Isaiah 53:12)

Folks, just pause for a moment before we move on. Look around at the people here, or the faces on screen. Are you here for what *they* can provide *you*, or is it the other way around, how *you* can serve *them*?

When you say how you'd like our meetings to run - when, over these next few months, you say how you'd like us to emerge from Lockdown and eventually fully populate this building again - is it a question of what *you* want, what *you* feel comfortable with, what makes *you* feel good ... or are you ready to give way to what others want or maybe even need?

Disciples can be surprisingly blind to what motivates them.

Disciples can be surprisingly blind to what motivates *us*.

So, as if to make the point all the more clear, Matthew slips in this account of how

- **Two blind men get it! (29-34)**

***And as they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him. And behold, there were two blind men sitting by the roadside, ...***

(Matthew 20:29-30)

Now if you're really alert, you'll have picked up that we've encountered something very much like this before in Matthew's gospel.

***And as Jesus passed on from there, two blind men followed him, crying aloud, "Have mercy on us, Son of David."***

(Matthew 9:27)

And some critics have said that this shows that these gospel accounts are just a rag-bag of stories tossed together all very randomly, and some had grown and/or changed in the telling, and this one even gets in here twice, in two obviously similar but obviously different forms. Well, the actual words are similar, it has to be said. Here's Matthew 20 again:

***... and when they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!"***

(Matthew 20:30)

And in Mark's gospel, the parallel account tells us of just one beggar, but named: Bartimaeus. There's a further complication, in that one account says Jesus is *entering* Jericho, and the other says that he's *leaving*. All of this, I think, could raise some legitimate questions in our minds. I haven't got time for a full-works answer, but let me toss in some suggestions, if this worries or confuses you.

First, the doubled story. It really is such an insult to the intelligence of people just because they lived 2000 years ago. So Matthew, seriously, couldn't have noticed that two anecdotes sounded a bit similar, and checked out whether both actually happened? That criticism is just chronological snobbery, thinking that only modern people have the intellectual nous to spot potential inconsistencies like that.

Two beggars, or one? Mark doesn't insist that there was *only* one beggar. And the fact that he gives us a name for the one could be easily accounted for if Bartimaeus might have been known by some of his potential readers. "Hey, that was when *Bartimaeus* met Jesus!" I might say that John Carter was converted at a **Billy Graham rally** back in the 1950's. I wouldn't be saying that he's the only one.

And leaving or entering Jericho. Depends on whether you mean old Jericho or new Jericho. The old town had been pretty much abandoned, but a newer town had been built nearby. Just like where we lived in Essex. There was once a village called Harlow. That became **Old Harlow**, with **Harlow** - the New Town - alongside. Someone who lived in *Old* Harlow might just say to someone who didn't know the area so well that they lived in Harlow.

So I'm happy with the account as Matthew gives it to us. Two beggars, crying out. The same words as those earlier beggars used, perhaps because word had got around in that community that *That's what WE said to Jesus, and he healed us!*

The crowd maybe think that Jesus wouldn't want to be troubled by riff-raff like this who make the place look untidy. *Keep quiet there! Move along!* But no.

***The crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent, but they cried out all the more, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!"***

(Matthew 20:31)

Strange, isn't it. The disciples who have been with Jesus for several years don't see what these two blind men see. Jesus doesn't do *position* and *power*. He's the Prince of Peace. He's not asking people to prove their merit ... just to ask for mercy.

So Jesus stops, once more. Asks, once more. Answers, once more.

***And stopping, Jesus called them and said, "What do you want me to do for you?" They said to him, "Lord, let our eyes be opened." And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they recovered their sight ...***

(Matthew 20:32-34)

And one more thing. To the disciples earlier on, distracted with power and prestige and priority, Jesus holds up his own example ...

**“... even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”**

(Matthew 20:28)

Implied question: will you follow? Will you abandon those selfish squabbles and foolish pretensions, and just leave it to your Heavenly Father to give good gifts to his children? Whatever gifts he chooses. Just because he is good and generous.

But the blind beggars, *they* saw. They got it. They asked and received mercy. And what does someone who knows they have received the amazing grace of God do? What else *would* anyone do, once you have seen the truth in person?

**... and followed him.**

(Matthew 20:34)

**Listen, believe and see**