

Our largest political parties are fighting within themselves. The Conservative Party is divided over how to leave the European Union, with a few perhaps thinking we shouldn't. The Labour Party seems to have replaced a row over anti-Semitism with a row over selection, or deselection, of members of parliament. In different ways their leaders, Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn, are being challenged. People are jockeying for power. And you can see similar strife in many other institutions or movements, not just political parties. There are power struggles in companies, unions, schools, public services, charities and so on. And the church is not immune. There can be conflict at any level, from parish church, to the worldwide church in all its variety.

Now, there is such a thing as healthy disagreement. The church and all other communities have to make decisions about what to do. The world is changing – we're part of that change – and we have to respond. People will have different ideas about what to do. There will be ways of arriving at a community decision. But sometimes we suspect certain people are trying to advance their own interests.

{OMIT! We can ask two questions. First, who is part of the process? Second, what is their motivation? For example, does their own advancement come into it? [FOR BEING PART OF THE PROCESS AND FOR MAKING A PARTICULAR DECISION]}

The disciples argued with one another who was the greatest. The disciples get a bad press, particularly in S. Mark's gospel. Maybe that's how they were, though they are described more favourably in the other gospels. Even if we can't know exactly what the facts were, we can accept that the gospels were written with a message for the church. What Jesus says to his disciples he is saying to Christians of later generations. The disciples are portrayed with different levels of understanding and commitment; these differences are true of the church today, as they have been in every age.

The disciples' desire for greatness is ironic, given that Jesus has just told them of his coming betrayal and death, when he will be subject to the power of others. This is the second 'prediction of the passion', as it's called. We read his first prediction of his passion in last week's gospel, set at Caesarea Philippi in the north of Israel, where Jesus tells his followers they must take up their cross as he is doing. Today they're at Capernaum in Galilee. There will be a third prediction later, as they draw near to Jerusalem. The cross dominates the journey; it is central to the Christian way of

life, the Way. It's remarkable that straight after Jesus has spoken of his death and resurrection for the third time, the disciples James and John, brothers, ask Jesus if they can sit on his right and his left in his glory. It's almost the same discussion as in today's gospel. They still haven't got it! Discipleship brings rewards, but it's not about power or personal advancement. It's about humility and service. The disciples need to put this into practice, as do church members, Christians, in every age.

In today's gospel Jesus acts out his teaching of welcoming a child, as an illustration of what his followers should seek to do. When a church receives and serves the weakest members of its community it is being true to Christ. It is actually welcoming him, and the Father who sent him.

We must not restrict Jesus' teaching to church policy and organised events. It's about the attitudes we hold, which will determine our actions, the way we live. It's about choosing humility rather than selfish ambition in all our dealings. It's about valuing those who are weak or vulnerable and helping them in practical ways. It's also about receiving what they can give: moving away from an 'us' and 'them' attitude to an acceptance that we are all God's children. Part of following the way of the cross is admitting our own weakness and vulnerability. Try telling all this to Donald Trump. Discipleship is generally counter-cultural.

God's way being the opposite of human power systems is a strong theme of our religious tradition. The prophet Jeremiah in the Old Testament reading experienced the opposition of the establishment as he tried to call them and the Israelite people to be faithful to the Lord. Parallels between the suffering of Jeremiah and Jesus can readily be seen. At one point in his life Jeremiah was thrown into a well and left to die, but was hauled out by a supporter. The words of S. James in the New Testament reading seem to apply to life in general as much as to the Christian community. It would have been an extraordinary church if his references to bitter envy, selfish ambition, disorder and wickedness of every kind, even the possibility of committing murder, were accurate descriptions of its life. Maybe he's exaggerating, but he clearly contrasts the way of self-centredness with the way of God's wisdom, which is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits.

The way Christians live, in the world and as a community, should be an example for all people in their various groupings of God's will for humanity. It is a journey with his Son through death into life. How often we fail! But God's grace will restore us. There can be no greater calling than to join Christ in his work of salvation.