

An imaginative and useful term used throughout history to describe life with its ups and downs is that of a cup. 'My cup shall be full,' says the Psalmist about his coming good fortune. The cup represents our lot, our experience. Sometimes it is sweet, sometimes bitter. There may be times when the cup of life is so bitter that we feel unable or unwilling to drink it. At other times our cup may be overflowing with sweetness.

There is a story of a prominent monk who lay dying. Many people came to see him at his bedside and praised his scholarship, his preaching, and his holiness. When they had all gone, he turned to his nurse and said, 'I am very disappointed. None of them mentioned the thing that I am most proud of - my humility.' In today's Gospel story, James and John show a similar weakness. They were proud of how they had accepted the hardships of following Jesus, and they felt they should be rewarded with a position of glory.

Jesus treats them ever so gently, managing to rebuke them mildly and then draw them on to a new perspective. He responds to their request for privileged places in his glory with a question: 'Can you drink the cup that I drink?' They immediately said they could because they thought it would be a very sweet cup. They were unable to understand that Jesus was really asking them, 'Are you willing to go through the suffering that I am to go through?' He also called his approaching sacrificial suffering and death a baptism.

It would be a huge undertaking for the disciples to drink the cup that Jesus was offering them. Indeed, when the time came for Jesus himself to drink this cup fully, he shrank from it. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed: 'Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.' Then, in tears and sweat and fear, he added, 'Yet, not my will but yours be done.'

And drink that cup he did. He carried out on the cross what he said and did symbolically at his Last Supper with his disciples, when he took the cup of wine and said, 'This is my blood shed for you.' The disciples did not understand at first that the Lord's cup would be a very bitter one. And when the time came, they left him to drink it alone.

We rarely know in advance what the cup of life holds for us. We are more likely to find out as we go along. Jesus chose to drink a very bitter cup, one that he certainly found difficult and would rather not have faced. But he did so out of

love – for God, for the world, for us. It was inevitable that the path, the way of Jesus would bring him into conflict with the religious and political powers of his day. Their rejection of him was in fact rejection of God. So Jesus' suffering and death were a vivid demonstration of where God was then. God was right there in it. The suffering of Jesus was God's own suffering.

At the first eucharist on that fateful Maundy Thursday night, Jesus asked his followers to drink his cup, to share his drink as a pledge for them to follow his example, to give of themselves as he was to give. That instruction is repeated to us every time we come together to do this, as now, to break his bread and drink of his cup.

What an awesome vocation we all have as Christians, Christ-ones! What an incredible way of life we are called to live! For the kingdom of God, which Jesus came to announce and to demonstrate, is all-demanding, embracing the whole of our life, calling those of us who would belong to it to give all that we can give – and even more. Such a calling would be impossible as well as pointless were we not following a Lord who has shared our life, knows our situation, and has been through the mill before us. He continues to say to us, 'follow me.' He invites us to share his life and his kind of life, and he is with us as we try.

Jesus gave himself completely, showing how God gives completely to us. As with him and many others who have walked and still walk the way of Christ, this giving sometimes involves suffering. We must not think that God is asking us to choose suffering. God does not want anyone to suffer. But the reality is that as we give ourselves in loving service to God and to people, life will not always be plain sailing. There will be the rough as well as the smooth, because that is an inevitable consequence of love.

If we can understand our difficult and painful experiences as a share in Christ's sufferings, and which are graced by his presence and therefore made sacred as we face them, then we may hope to taste a sweetness in our bitter cup that is healing and liberating, and which enables us to find a peace that transcends our pain or sorrow. To know that we share the life of Christ in the bad times as well as the good will enable us more effectively to bring the light of Christ to others in their need and somehow give them hope.

As we are raised to a new level of Christlikeness, and a deeper awareness that God is always with us, come what may, we come to possess a faith and a love that is unconditional. That is to discover true freedom, and it enables our cup to be full to overflowing with the sweet taste of resurrection, of eternity. For to share Christ's cup brings us to share in his glory.