

Mark 9:30-37**Becoming a servant of all**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's gospel reading is one of many occasions where the disciples just don't get it. They don't understand what Jesus is doing. They don't understand what Jesus is saying. They don't understand who Jesus is. This ignorance of the disciples, especially in Mark's gospel account, is downright comical at times, but it's still a serious matter. Despite all that they have witnessed and heard from Jesus, they still do not seem to have a clue what his mission is about. And if the ones who spent their days travelling everywhere with Jesus didn't get things right, then should we really expect to fare any better?

Just like the disciples, we're pretty good at missing the point and instead arguing about who's the greatest. Jesus had just told them again about what awaits him in Jerusalem. He has taught them that the Messiah must suffer and die. He has taught them about the cost of discipleship, about taking up their cross to follow him. He has been transfigured on a mountain before three of them, appearing in dazzling white clothes talking with Moses and Elijah. It should be clear to the disciples that Jesus is something greater. It should be clear to the disciples that the kingdom of heaven has come to them in Jesus and through Jesus. And it should be clear that this kingdom does not operate according to the same power structures as the kingdoms of this world.

It's really confusing, then, that they would still be seeking places of earthly honour. But they do. And when Jesus asks about it, they are too ashamed to speak. But Jesus, in his mercy, continues to teach them. True greatness, according to Jesus, is not to be above others, but to be least of all and servant of all. True greatness is not to ascend the social ladder but rather descend it, deliberately taking the lowest place. True greatness is not to seek the company of the powerful but to welcome and care for those without status, such as the child that Jesus embraces and places before his disciples.

In any culture, children are vulnerable. They are dependent on others for their survival and well-being. In the ancient world though, their vulnerability was magnified by the fact that they had no legal protection. A child had no status, no rights. A child certainly had nothing to offer anyone else in terms of honour or status. But it is precisely these little ones with whom Jesus identifies:

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (Mark 9:37, NRSV)

This is not the same as the 'childlike faith' mentioned elsewhere in scripture. Jesus is making a very deliberate point about status and honour and greatness. In a world that was infused with a strong sense of honour and shame, the rich and powerful hoped to demonstrate their honour by the company they kept. The sense of class and social status was of a much greater scale than we might recognise today. There wasn't really anything like what we would call middle class. You were either wealthy, and at the top of the social structure, or like most people you were poor and had nothing. And if you were wealthy, you made sure to associate with the right people, hoping to accumulate favour and cement your status.

So, Jesus saying that the way to gain honour is to receive those who are without honour goes completely against the logic of that society. But this is the way of God's kingdom. This is where we see true power, the power of the one who sent Jesus. This is displayed in Jesus embracing a child, the ultimate symbol of not yet knowing, not yet understanding, and having much to learn. But also one usually uninhibited in asking questions about things that are new and different. I'm sure you've experienced that at some point. A child will see someone that's different in some way, whether it's a visible disability or maybe they're wearing clothing from a different culture, and the child will loudly point it out. No sense of shame in asking about something they haven't seen before. Quite the opposite of the disciples in the reading for today who stayed silent in their shame, and for most of us who apparently know better.

But we need not fear our questions, our misunderstandings, our confusion, or our curiosity in the presence of One whose 'perfect love casts out all fear' (1 John 4:18). There is good news to be found in a Jesus who welcomes us even when we don't understand his teaching. There is good news to be found in a Jesus who associates with the last and the least in society. In Mark's gospel account alone Jesus willingly encounters Gentiles, and lepers, and the demon-possessed, and tax collectors, and other notorious sinners. He even welcomes and makes time for little children.

The grace of God in Christ Jesus does away with the world's notions of greatness based on status or wealth or personal achievement. It is hard for us to live and see the world in this same way. Greatness on Jesus' terms means being humble, lowly, and vulnerable as a child. Greatness on Jesus' terms is risky, and can even get a person killed. But as Jesus repeatedly teaches, his way of greatness is also the path to true life. And so, aspiring to greatness in the kingdom of heaven means aspiring to love and serve those who are least, who are vulnerable, who have no earthly status or power of their own.

This usually means giving up something of ours. Whether it's our time, or our resources, or even our sense of propriety and honour. Just like the disciples, we are fooling ourselves if we think we are beyond little things like caring for the vulnerable and needy. We are called to love and serve our neighbour. Jesus said this was the second greatest commandment. That's got to mean some effort on our part.

If you're wondering how you might go and serve your neighbour in need today, then I usually like to think about the three Ts. That is, your time, your talents, and your treasures. I'm sure I've mentioned these before in a sermon, but they are a useful little tool in helping you see where God is calling you into service.

In a busy world, the greatest blessing we can often give is our time. Instead of using our time for ourselves and for important people, we use it for the sake of the least, the vulnerable, and the needy. Instead of using our talents to gain reputation for ourselves, we use them for the sake of the least, the vulnerable, and the needy. Instead of using our treasures, meaning our money and other possessions, for gaining earthly status, we use them for the sake of the least, the vulnerable, and the needy. To do this requires the Holy Spirit to work in us to draw us out from ourselves and help us see the world the God sees the world.

So, we must pray that our eyes would be opened. We pray that we would understand what Jesus is doing. We pray that we would understand what Jesus is saying. We pray that we would understand who Jesus is. And that because of Jesus we may be able to welcome a child in his name and in doing so welcome Jesus, and welcome the who sent him, our gracious heavenly Father, who calls us into his kingdom, where we find our true life, and our true eternal home. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.