

## Sermon - the living parable

Based on the reading: Mark 9.30-37

### The Messiah who's got it 'wrong'

- Last week's Gospel passage was the pivotal moment for the disciples, as, for the first time, they come to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah.
- From that moment Jesus immediately moved to change the popular expectation that the disciples had, of what the Messiah would be and do.
- At that point
  - he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. (Mark 8.32)*
- He then took Peter, James and John with him up the mountain, where they witnessed his transfiguration.
- After coming down, he released a boy from a destructive spirit, and then continued on into Galilee with his disciples.
- We are told that Jesus was now focused primarily on teaching and preparing his disciples, so he reminded them again:
  - 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.'* But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. (Mark 9.32)
- They at least know not to disagree with him.
- Nevertheless they cannot make sense of his words.
- Perhaps they were waiting for him to explain it as a parable - because they could not grasp the underlying meaning.
- It's interesting to note here that the penny only drops after the events Jesus describes, and they have spent time once again away from others, praying together.
- And that's when the Pentecost moment happens, and then it's as if the penny drops not only in terms of their mental comprehension of what Jesus had been talking about, but they experience it as a complete paradigm shift, and their whole worldview is altered forever.
- However, in today's Gospel passage that Pentecost moment is still months into the future.

### One-upmanship

- Today they are still thinking in terms of the popular notion of what the Messiah would be and do.
- Presumably a strong leader who would re-establish the Kingdom of David: inspiring others to rise up against the Roman occupiers, ensure that the Roman's puppet rulers were cast down, and get the religious leaders to pull their socks up.
- Of course, such a Messianic leader would need to have assistants to delegate to, to share his authority, and help him in the new national order he was going to establish.
- And who better than they?
- After all, he had handpicked them, and so he must have had some great purpose for each of them.
- Perhaps they were very conscious of Peter, James and John having been up the mountain with him, while the others had stayed behind in the local village.
- Maybe some of them were envious of the three, thinking that Jesus might have been planning some special status for them.
- Or maybe those three were feeling rather special and different from the others themselves.

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- At any rate, we are told that the disciples *argued with one another about who was the greatest.* (Mark 9.34)
- Jesus speaks directly about their attitude.
- And to make his point he holds a little child, and uses the child as the perfect illustration - as a parable to reveal his meaning.

### The value of a child

- It is helpful at this point to engage with the attitude towards children that was prevalent in the world at that time.
- Children would no doubt have been special to their parents, and maybe within their wider family networks.
- However, from a general social point of view, they were worthless.
- Children had no social standing - no social or legal value - they were nobodies, until they became adults.
- So for someone, like Jesus, to deign to notice somebody else's child, and to treat that child as somebody in their own right - as having social standing, as having worth and counting as an adult would -
- this would have been really unexpected.
- The child becomes a living parable for them.
- And Jesus, holding the child, in effect says to them: 'This is me.'
- 'When you treat a nobody, a worthless no-account person as having worth, and value, and deserving of respect and attention, and being honoured as a welcome guest - then you have done this to me.'
- 'Because this child represents me.'
- I'm sure the disciples would have pondered about this for a long time, trying to figure out how this worked.
- After all, how could a Messiah - a great leader who would establish a new political kingdom - be of no account, of no value, of no worth?
- Of course, Jesus is effectively saying the opposite: not that when you regard the Messiah you must treat the Messiah as having the worth of a child - but when you regard a child, you must treat the child as having the worth of the Messiah.
- And not just children, but anyone of little or no worth to you - anyone who you regard as being worth less than you.
- You are to see not only Jesus in them, but God in them.
- We might want to regard our God as being so much greater than anything we can imagine.
- And yet at the same time, our God comes to us in the form of people who are worth less to us.
- And when we treat them as having great worth, then Jesus, and the Divine, are manifestly present.

### Whose agenda?

- There are at least two additional teachings here.
- The first is the notion of status within the church or Christian community.
- Jesus says: '*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*' (Mark 9.35)
- We need to be wary of those who promote themselves, or who promote their own agenda.
- They might be fellow disciples, fellow sisters or brothers in Christ, but they are like the first disciples who argued amongst themselves about who was greater.
- Those disciples were focused on their own agenda, on their own purpose, on what they might be able to achieve in their own standing.

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- It can be easy for Christians who assume a role or responsibility in the Church to think that that is sufficient, in that merely being a church-going Christian automatically makes their agenda - what they are wanting to achieve - in line with Christ's purpose.
- It happens all too easily, and rather more often than we might realise.
- The reality is that being a follower of Jesus doesn't mean that one is completely on track with Jesus.
- After all, it took a lot of intentional teaching by Jesus with his first disciples, and even then the pieces only fell into place later - and needed to be brought back into alignment at times after that.
- Indeed, we heard St James himself admit to this in his letter today, when he wrote: *For all of us make many mistakes. (James 3.2)*
- So the living parable that Jesus demonstrates in the child that he holds, provides the question that everyone with a position or responsibility in the Christian community needs to ask themselves:
  - 'Am I putting myself last - treating everyone else as having more worth than me?'
- This is not about demeaning yourself, and not about treating yourself as worthless.
- No - you have worth, so don't deny your own value to God.
- It's not about diminishing your own worth, but about elevating everyone else's worth.
- So the question to ask, especially if you have any responsibilities, is:
  - 'Am I treating others as having more worth than me - and am I serving their needs?'
- And we can only do that when we give up our own agenda, and follow Christ's agenda.

### Being the child

- The other teaching comes from the child itself, and seeing ourselves as that child.
- There are many occasions in our lives when we feel that we have no value, no worth, and perhaps nothing to offer.
- I am profoundly aware of my own mother's situation at this time, as a 92 year old woman whose mind is disconnecting from her immediate reality.
- She is less and less able to care for herself, and is more and more dependent on others taking care of her needs.
- She is less and less able to *relate* to others, in that she is less able to contribute or respond to others socially - and is more dependent on people responding to her with little or no expectation that she'll respond back to them meaningfully or kindly.
- And people find themselves similarly, at other points in their lives, when they might feel they have nothing to offer anyone, and might feel they have little worth.
- These times can be unhappy or unfulfilling.
- Maybe when we are experiencing such times like these, we can draw strength from Jesus' living parable, and recognise ourselves as the child that Jesus holds, and makes welcome.
- We are invited to see that when people respond to our need, perhaps our helplessness, perhaps our own sense of being worth less - that when people respond by serving us, that they are serving the Christ in us.
- This is such a wonderful idea.
- When people extend welcome and hospitality to me in any way, and especially when I'm not in a position to repay them, then I can, very humbly, give thanks that they are welcoming the Christ in me, who is blessing them in return.
- When I put my own pride to one side, and accept the service others offer, then it gives *them* the opportunity to serve Christ, and be blessed in that.
- This helps me to come to terms with my own helplessness in whatever that situation is at the time, and helps me learn to accept what others have to offer.
- I think to myself: if I accept their offer of service, then *they* will be blessed.

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- So, in my own helplessness, my own perceived worthlessness, that then becomes the gift I can give them - the opportunity to be blessed.

So may you ponder on the living parable of Jesus identifying himself in those who are less valued.

May you be teachable - may you sit with Jesus and take the time to learn from him.

May you question whose agenda you are really following - your own, or Christ's.

And may you humbly accept the service of others, so that they too can be blessed.