

Who is the greatest?

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Mark 9.30-37

Introduction

You know that series of books *Windows for Dummies*, *Philosophy for Dummies*? Well Mark is a kind of "Jesus for Dummies". The idea is to make the mistakes and misunderstandings of the disciples so plain we, the disciples, can learn not to be dummies. Today's reading is a classic in this genre.

The original disciples simply couldn't get it. I put the question to myself, "Would I have got it?" That pulled me up short. I think not. Mark is warning the church in his own day (say about 66CE) and ours. Each generation has its own peculiar form of being dense. But we western liberals all pride ourselves on being better than the dummies of the past.

The background

Last week we read the story in 8:31-38. Jesus foretells his death and resurrection. Peter can't cope, rebukes Jesus and ends up with Jesus speaking the terrifying and withering words, "Get behind me, Satan." Such a rebuke would demolish me: I am addressed as Satan, the adversary of God and the conspirer against Christ. Jesus then speaks to them of taking up the cross, following him and finding life in him. He mystifies them.

Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem and has but little time, so he turns from miracle to teaching. He will perform fewer miracles, try and draw the disciples closer to himself and his mission. His teaching is about what it means to follow him on the way.

Early Christianity was called the Way because it was seen as a journey, a lived life following the way of Jesus. It is not about doctrine, although that is important, but primarily about the journey that disciples have chosen.

So Jesus takes them on a journey. Last week he was in the far north at Caesarea Philippi and now he is walking in more familiar territory in Galilee. He must spend undistracted time with disciples.

The journey is not simply geographical but spiritual and educational; from what the disciples know to what is inconceivable for them. It is from social acceptance in Galilee and Capernaum to conflict and hostility in Jerusalem. And that conflict is the first theme and for the second time Jesus tells his disciples of his impending death.

The second prediction of the passion

Jesus is simply telling his disciples what is about to happen. There is no embellishment of theological reflection. He simply wants to prepare his disciples for the future.

The announcement simply puzzles them. It is not their understanding of what Messiah would do. Messiah would go to Jerusalem to announce the end of gentile rule and oppression, and the setting of God's people free to serve him, with the restoration of the Temple and the kingship. It would be a time of blossoming. And here is Jesus talking about death, in fact, going on about it. It's against everything that makes life plausible. It might be like a rugby league or AFL player saying that he is going to play the finals with his hands and feet tied.

Jesus throws out a few hints about what his death might mean. It is about human power and God's power. Judas handing Jesus over to the Sanhedrin, from the Sanhedrin to Pilate and

from Pilate to the soldiers which is the delivering of the innocent to human power of administering death through violence, hatred, fear and coercion. It is about power.

For Jesus all this is following the will of God and being the servant of God. Whatever Jesus is doing, it is not heroics, although it requires immense courage and faith that God will act for him, His servant. He will hand himself over to human power over death.

But there is the mention of the resurrection. We take it for granted but back then the idea that God would raise one person simply was not on the horizon. The extent of Jesus' trust in God is made clear by this firm belief. God was about to exercise power very differently. It was not on anyone else's radar screen. The God of surprises will surprise us all with the power of life, of new creation, of hope.

He stuns the disciples and they were too afraid to ask him questions. And that leads them astray. I can understand their reaction after the rebuke of Peter but that was not for asking a question. That was for trying to tell Jesus not to follow God's will, a very different proposition. However, they had trouble telling the difference.

In the light of this prediction of his death, Jesus turns to the disciples to talk about discipleship.

Who is the greatest?

And what a shock it must have been when he asked them about their conversation on the journey. "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest."

They have so misunderstood him that they were arguing about power and status, about "who was the greatest". Of course, 2,000 years of history tells us that we shouldn't be surprised. We have been doing it ever since. That is why it is specifically mentioned twice in Mark as Jesus goes to the cross. The journey to the cross subverts all human systems of status and power.

In last week's prediction of the cross, Jesus rebuked Peter because the temptation Peter puts to Jesus here is the will to power. "Only through the exercise of might, by the use of the armies of heaven will the world be redeemed, will men and women be set free and a glorious future open before us. We need to do what works; we need to destroy some so that we continue to live as we wish." That is the murderous equation of utility—the murderous ethic of our day.

So where to for Jesus from here?

First of all, he sits down. We might interpret that as exasperation. But it is the position of authoritative teaching. This is so important everything else has to stop, even the journey because the journey cannot continue if this is not explained.

Having sat down he then states a principle: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." This is principle of the cross. It is the principle of holding power in the service of the freedom and life of others.

So if we think that following Jesus will enhance our status, our power, our bank balance or bolster our narcissistic self, then think again. Every socio-economic indicator of status and power is overturned. We normally attribute value to those who have power, defined by wealth, celebrity, military or political. Jesus says the last/least are the valuable ones.

And just when you thought it couldn't get any worse, he takes a child, puts her among them, and took her in his arms, warmly embracing her. Let's take that action first. Some find this a

bit out of place in this context. So let's explore it a bit and see if it fits. This is a prophetic action that would have shocked the audience especially male disciples, although there is more to come.

Why use the child? It is not a romantic or idealistic gesture. No-one regarded children as innocent. That is a romantic notion of late modernity. Jesus is not a romantic. This child was not a baby but one that could stand in the midst, perhaps even a slave child.

Children were the bottom of the heap. They were both vulnerable and invisible. A child might be hurt or damaged without anyone knowing or caring (especially a slave child). Only parental status or wealth might protect and save them.

Even in our world we know of children abused; children murdered, children homeless, children held in detention camps and prisons, children war victims across the world, refugee children dead on beaches. In our own society they are as vulnerable to our manipulations and violence as anywhere else. These you must welcome and Jesus uses the prophetic action of embrace. Welcome and embrace is a lovely idea of the gospel. The vulnerable and the invisible are not asked to do an entrance exam to the faith, sign a decision card. They are welcomed. They bring with them Christ who brings with him God.

People love modern narcissistic spiritualities that cater for the power and material needs of modern people. Such spiritualities may be Christian in origin or sourced elsewhere. Here is Christian spirituality at its most confronting. You want to find the presence of God? Forget status, forget power, forget celebrity. Embrace the invisible and the vulnerable. Embrace the cross.

Now maybe, too, we can see how shocking a thing it is to think of children being abused in the church of Christ. It is the rejection of the Messiah's cross, His sending God and Messiah's way of salvation.

Conclusion

Our real freedom will come when we can welcome the vulnerable and the invisible, the odd, the most villainous or miserable as persons who bear Christ to us and in whom God longs to express himself.

Power lies with the Crucified one. This is the Way.