

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2018
Jeremiah 11:18-20, James 3:1-12, Mark 9:30-37

You may, or may not, have heard of the 'Birkenhead Drill.' It was immortalised by Kipling's in his poem 'Soldier an' Sailor too' which contains the lines: '*But to stand an' be still to the Birkenhead drill is a damn tough bullet to chew.*' It was first associated with the sinking of HMS Birkenhead in 1852 off the South African coast. Only 193 of the estimated 643 people on board the troop ship survived. The soldiers' chivalry gave rise to the unofficial "women and children first" protocol when abandoning ship, which became known as the Birkenhead drill.

Such a protocol could never have been conceived of in New Testament times such were the status of women and children. Even much later in the 13th century Thomas Aquinas taught that in a raging fire a husband was obliged to save his father first, then his mother, next his wife, and last of all his young child. When a famine came upon the land, in many cultures, children would be fed last, after the adults. This helps us to understand the radical nature of Jesus' words in today's gospel when he takes a small child into the midst of their gathering.

In this episode from Mark the disciples have been arguing over who is the greatest. I wonder how they conceived of or measured greatness. I can't help but think of Mohammed Ali, not only was his greatness displayed in the ring but also in the gift of the gab! Given that Peter, James and John have just experienced an astonishing vision as Jesus is transfigured before them I wonder if they were main protagonists in this argument. It is thought by some commentators that James and John were political activists connected with the militant underground Jewish liberation movement – the zealots. (PFJ not the JPF). They were pretty vocal about what they wanted from his new Jesus movement perhaps they measured greatness by who had the gift of the gab! In response to this Jesus takes a child a member of society with no voice and places him or her in the midst of them. He then describes the nature of true greatness – being a servant, a deacon indeed, being as lowly as a child, one who in New Testament society is certainly never heard.

When we bring a small child into our midst we will this morning we are indeed all blessed. When we welcome Annaliese this morning into the body of Christ, in his name, it is just as if we are welcoming Christ himself into our midst and through him the God and creator of us all. It is indeed an awesome thing that we do! But that's very easy for me to say, but what does it mean?

Clearly the disciples failed to understand Jesus and more often as not we too struggle. It is perhaps the paradoxical nature of the 'Good News' that is at the heart of the struggle. St Paul, reminds us that in baptism we are sharing in the *death* of Jesus. Indeed when Jesus has another encounter with the Boanerges brothers, James and John who want to secure their place in heaven, he says to them - 'Are you able to take the suffering that I am about to take? Are you

able to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' Yes they say, but clearly they didn't. Paul of course also tells us we will share in his resurrection, Jesus too talks of resurrection but the disciples struggle with all this talk of rising from the dead. So the boys turn to what they know; they want to plan, they want to know what will happen in this new kingdom who will be in charge. We can see, the politics of their day and indeed the politics of our own day playing out. Like them we try and fit this kingdom into our categories and it is an uncomfortable fit. Fortunately Jesus doesn't chide them (or us) he reminds them that the Good News of God's grace occurs through him and in him, the one who is the servant of all. 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.' But I still ask, what does this mean?

I have been reading a little recently on the Letter of James through the eyes of the Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard. His quote on this is perhaps the most succinct: Christianity requires everything of you, but when you have accomplished everything it requires, all the same that you realise have been saved by grace and nothing else. Where do we start, what of you parents and Godparents and your precious little one.

The Letter of James says much about wealth and poverty, as did Jesus, but just as prominent in James are his words on speech ethics and today we heard his treatise on this topic. It is a sermon in its own right, full of evocative metaphors, huge ships steered by small rudders, large horses guided by small bits; such is the power of the tongue. Today, as much as ever, we need to think about our speech ethics because what we say has profound power. The mass media, the internet, the twittersphere all these forms of communication hold within themselves the potential for good or ill. Much of the malaise within our political and social spheres today can be traced back to speech ethics. Perhaps too in our own lives this is where things go wrong.

So what does it mean? As we welcome into God's Church today a little child, it should remind us of the presence of Christ in our midst. Our faith in God's grace through the presence of the risen Christ among us, is manifest in the nature of our community and the nature of our community will be revealed in the way we speak to one another and importantly who has a voice in our community. We might be tempted to think that greatness is measured by those who have the most to say. But clearly we need to be a community in which we are servants of one another, a community in which power is exercised through childlike servant leadership, a community in which we are all heard. Yes it is true like the disciples we struggle to grasp what it all means, this rising from the dead. But let's put aside thoughts of end of life as we think we might know it and remember that resurrected life begins at baptism, Annaliese's life anew begins today and is not just an event but a new way of being together a new way of conversing. This is not easy and like Jeremiah it will have its moments, like him we might be tempted to respond like for like, but also like him we should turn to God... for to you I have committed my cause This is what it means. Amen.