

# **Achieving Recognition, Securing Differentiation**

Sermon for the 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, 17 October 2021

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

**The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell**

Isaiah 53: 4-12; Psalm 91: 9-16; Hebrews 5: 1-10; Mark 10: 32-45

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Do you ever find yourself in an exchange with someone and getting the wrong end of the stick, so you end up talking past each other? It's been happening regularly for Lisa and me during lockdown, stuck in our flat together day in, day out, week in, week out. So, for example, yesterday she was looking me over—checking on her repair job, she said. I thought she meant her attempt with the scissors to tidy up my overdue-for-a-haircut lockdown appearance, but after a bit of confusion on my part it turned out that she meant the hole that she'd darned in my favourite old jumper, which I was wearing.

Well, we see an even more classic case of cross purposes in today's gospel reading. Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem with his increasingly frightened disciples to meet his terrible destiny—a destiny that he spells out in unsparing detail. But those brothers James and John think that they're on a different journey. They think that they're on the path

to success, to achieving some well-deserved recognition perhaps, or maybe to the resolution of some longstanding sibling rivalry, with each given their own non-competitive place of honour: one on the right and one on the left, securing the differentiation that all rival siblings are seeking.

After all, this struggle for recognition is the main driving force of history, according to the mid-century French philosopher Alexandre Kojève. While for René Girard, who built on Kojève, it's differentiation, it's the need to be different, to be distinctive, that humans crave, so they can escape being mired in envy, rivalry, and ultimately the threat of violence. In today's gospel the need to achieve recognition and maybe to secure differentiation, or perhaps both, has these two brothers in a headlock, and Jesus wants to break them out of it.

How does he do it? Well, first, it's not by getting angry at them like the other disciples do. Instead, Jesus charts a wiser pastoral course. He gently explains to them where worthwhile recognition and true differentiation are to be found. He has this morning's so-called servant song from Isaiah 53 in mind, in which the ancient vocation of God's people is set out: to be God's servant among the nations and to bear the cost, which is shame and spitting and the potential loss of

everything. Jesus offers himself as a model who will transform their desire, away from following worldly models of success and great individuals who seek to secure truly one-off status and learning instead to find the greatness of God in humble, and likely costly service.

This is how the great high priest of our Hebrews reading today achieves recognition from God. He's heard, we're told, because of his reverent submission. And how does he secure differentiation? By embracing our common state of human frailty, by not seeking to escape our shared condition. So, Jesus paints a countercultural picture, inviting his disciples to follow him into it. Which is of course what he does for us here in the Eucharist, Sunday by Sunday our whole lives long.

Now, this story wouldn't be in the Gospel unless achieving recognition and securing differentiation weren't problems for Christians—unless following Jesus in his very different version of recognition and differentiation wasn't a challenge for the Church in that and in every subsequent Christian generation. Because all around us we see people in the same imaginative headlock that James and John found themselves in.

Everywhere the struggle for recognition is on: the quest for power, for fame, for the best positions. And if you pursue success in a less wealth-producing life of public service, then there's an AM or an AO waiting for you as a consolation prize. Or you might crave popularity, being noticed, being admired, and you'll sorely miss it when it's lacking. Like the French woman of a certain age in Milan Kundera's novel *Identity*, which I read through the week, who struggled with the fact that men didn't look at her admiringly anymore.

As for securing differentiation, I can't help thinking of anti-vaxxers—of the young male protesters in Melbourne recently who just don't want to be told what to do, who resist being compliant like sheep, along with others who can't bear the thought that they and their clearly special children are just like everyone else, just part of the herd, when it comes to public health.

Now, perhaps I'm veering towards a tone of judgementalism here, so let me publicly take some of my own medicine. A few years back I had some opportunities that may have led me to high office in the Church, with episcopal selection processes in two regional dioceses and for Dean of a metropolitan cathedral. I fancied myself for this sort of role, I thought I had the right stuff, and I unhelpfully compared myself with

other bishops and Deans I'd known who I thought clearly lacked the right stuff. But in each case I ended up withdrawing myself from consideration as I became increasingly convinced that my calling was to be a working theologian, and that I wasn't prepared to give up my hard won intellectual edge and my great opportunity for creative theological work in pursuit of something which I reluctantly came to realise probably wasn't my calling. So, I settled for being a reclusive theologian in a Church that has little if any interest in theology and no jobs for theologians, until eventually I learned to love my situation in life and to find peace in it. As Thomas Merton reflected in his poem about being a serene disciple,

It was a lucky wind  
That blew away his halo with his cares,  
A lucky sea that drowned his reputation.<sup>1</sup>

This is the challenge of spiritual poverty that Augustine faced in the fifth century—one of the Church's great theologians who'd had the episcopate thrust on him—reflecting on the attraction of high office versus the sanctified leisure of a theologian's study. In his great work *City of God* Augustine had this to say about this challenge:

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, "When in the Soul of the Serene Disciple," online at <https://www.alliesonthejourney.com/musings/thomas-merton-when-in-the-soul-of-the-serene-disciple>

A 'bishop' who has set his heart on a position of eminence rather than an opportunity for service should realize that he is no bishop. So, then, no one is debarred from devoting himself to the pursuit of truth, for that involves a praiseworthy kind of leisure. But high position, although without it a people cannot be ruled, is not in itself a respectable object of ambition, even if that position be held and exercised in a manner worthy of respect. We see then that it is the love of truth that looks for sanctified leisure, while it is the compulsion of love that undertakes righteous engagement in affairs. If this latter burden is not imposed on us, we should employ our freedom from business in the quest for truth and in its contemplation, while if it is laid upon us, it is to be undertaken because of the compulsion of love.<sup>2</sup>

And yet Augustine's purity of motive, entirely in keeping with Christ's teaching in today's Gospel, is harder to find nowadays in a Church where would-be bishops have to sell themselves to electors and even lobby for position.

So, friends, let's not be getting the wrong end of the stick and following a lead other than that of Jesus, of the suffering servant, whose recognition and differentiation came from God, to follow instead the

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<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.19

insecure wannabes who crave it and pursue it as if that could possibly be the meaning of life. Jesus has a gentle but firm message for a world like this, and if we genuinely follow him, our lives can become the medium of that message.

The Lord be with you ...