

Sunday between 18th and 24th September [25]

Mark 9:30-37

Having 4 gospels gives a wonderful dimension to the same story of Jesus' life and ministry. Each of the writers comes to the story with their own emphasis and style which means that there are some elements that we hear only once out of 4, some that we hear consistently 4 out of 4 and still others that we hear differently from some or all of the authors. Jesus' teaching on children seems to me to be one of the ones where opinions differ.

We, as readers who hear the gospel regularly, often get these differences mixed up or even don't read them correctly because of what we think they say. This is regularly the case with today's gospel, we remember the words of Jesus, "If anyone would enter the kingdom of God they must become like a little child" but that's not what the scripture here says. There is also a passage about Jesus stopping the disciples from inhibiting the parents from asking Jesus to bless their children, and that's often the scene we think of when we consider Jesus' response to little ones. but it's not that one either.

In this reading Jesus was staying in a house in Capernaum and we can assume that this child was part of the household, and Jesus has just found out that the disciples are trying to work out amongst themselves who is the most important, who should be allowed to lead. They all knew that Jesus was in charge, but after him, who was to be next in line? It's not a terrible question when you think about it, every organisation has a chain of command, even the Church, it's reassuring to know who you can go to for help and it keeps you honest when you know there is someone responsible for keeping you on task. But Jesus was not creating a church structure, he was calling people to faith and as such they followed him, and no one else.

To illustrate his point Jesus takes the child as an example and sets the child in the middle of the adults, thereby making them all take notice of the one person they had probably completely ignored until this point. He tells them that greatness is achieved in God's kingdom through service and not through worldly honours, titles, or other people's adulation. In this encounter with a child Jesus is not using the attributes of childhood to encourage us back to a simpler time by suggesting we become like children in faith, rather Jesus is acknowledging that children are powerless, vulnerable and often ignored when big decisions are made and so to truly show our commitment to God's way, to loving people in the way that God loves them, we need to be actively looking for opportunities to do things differently, to advocate for the powerless, to protect the vulnerable and the bring into central focus those who society ignores.

And make no mistake, this is not easy. This is not what the world does and it is not what the world supports. Think about what it is like during an election campaign, how often do we hear from any candidate about advocating for the powerless, when do candidates talk about the vulnerable in our society and what they plan to do to protect and help them? These are not usually central issues, instead we hear a great deal from candidates appealing to the particular worries, fears, interests and greed of those who have the power to vote them into power. Christ like leadership, it seems, doesn't suit election campaigns.

But that is our reality, we live in the world, not in a fully perfected kingdom of God. What we see in secular leadership should give us cause to stop and think because it is at odds with biblical models of leadership. The world looks for leaders who are strong enough to take on all the problems that are thrown their way, God looks for leaders who rely on God's guidance and do God's will. Throughout biblical history it is the has beens, the write offs, the weakest, the unacceptable that God has chosen. Abraham chosen to father a nation, Jacob chosen over his brother Esau, David the young shepherd boy chosen to rule a nation, Jesus, the stone that the builders rejected chosen to become the head of the corner.

When you come to think of it, that has always been God's way, we shouldn't be surprised when the path the world takes sits uncomfortably with us, every faithful person of God has had the same experience. But inevitability cannot be the reason to ignore it. Jesus' call to us is the same as it was to his disciples in that room in Capernaum, whoever wishes to come first in God's kingdom must put themselves last of all and servant of all, those who would do well in God's kingdom must receive the lowliest, weakest, most vulnerable into their hearts, make their needs our needs, their problems our problems, and in so doing we care not only for the person in needs, but also for Christ himself.

That is as much valid to us today as it ever was. Our world is full of the vulnerable, the powerless, the ignored. In our society we enjoy amazing freedoms of speech and are wealthy enough by global standards to make a practical difference. We have the right to lobby our worldly leaders on issues they can affect, we have charities set up who will do the work of distributing any practical help we wish to share, we are free to debate, discuss and educate those around us on the issues that others would use to further marginalise the already weak and powerless around us.

We can do so much, even when we struggle to know where to start, despite knowing we cannot do it all. But as those called into relationship with God we must never lose sight of why we are called. It's not because of what we can do in our own power, but because of our faithfulness. It's never about our skills, but about our willingness to let God in and hear his promptings and follow his guidance. That can take us to places we never expected, but it is where we find the peace that passes understanding.

You might protest at all this and be thinking that you have no interest in being the greatest in God's kingdom, so it doesn't really apply to you. Just remember, even if you are not motivated to greatness on the world's terms, it doesn't mean you are not meant for something wonderful by God. The call is the same for us all, by baptism we are members of Christ, children of our Heavenly Father, brothers and sisters by faith. Uniquely and wonderfully made in the image of God and called to a purpose.

May we all, this week, prayerfully explore God's call to us, looking particularly for the powerless, the vulnerable and the ignored and for ways in which we can receive them in God's name.