

Sunday 19th September 9am service

Mark 9: 30–37 & James 3:13-4:8

Preacher: Jenny Warrington

Jesus passes through Galilee again, but does not want anyone to know because his public ministry is coming to an end. He needs privacy to continue teaching his small band of disciples about the suffering and death that God requires of him and about what he requires of them. Success hinges on training this motley crew, who will carry the gospel to the world. The crowds were drawn to his charismatic teaching, but Jesus needed a core of people to truly understand and commit their lives to spreading the Gospel, after he dies.

When he makes his second prediction of his death and resurrection, the disciples keep silent. They do not understand what he is talking about, but they are afraid to ask him what exactly it means. Either they are worried of being rebuked if they say anything, as Peter was earlier, or they prefer to live in a state of denial. They may not have wanted to understand the unpleasant reality, staring Jesus in the face.

Fear, however, will increasingly control their reactions to the events Jesus predicts. Jesus adds a new detail here to his previous announcement of his suffering: In this account he is “going to be handed over into the hands of men” or “betrayed into the hands of men”. The disciples should have been worrying about who it was, who might betray him, but instead they blanked that comment and began to spar with one another, about who ranks the highest. When they arrived in Capernaum, and they gather together, Jesus asked them what they were discussing on the way.

The question meets with an embarrassed silence; he has caught them in yet another dispute.

They had argued among themselves over who forgot the loaves (8: 16).

They had argued with the teachers of the law, when they failed to exorcise an unclean spirit (9: 14).

They will argue with successful exorcists, who do not follow them (9: 38).

They will speak disparagingly at a woman who displays extravagant devotion to Jesus and denounce it as a waste (14: 4–5).

This competitive spirit, even taints their last supper with Jesus, as Peter boasts that he will outdo all the other disciples in remaining faithful to Jesus (14: 29).

In this present passage the disciples are jockeying for position to be honoured alongside their powerful Messiah.

The picture Mark presents has tragic-comic dimensions. Jesus walks ahead in silence on his way to his sacrificial death while his straggling disciples push and shove, trying to establish the order of the procession behind him. But the dispute, opens the door, for Jesus’ teaching on selfless service.

The teaching of Jesus is full of Paradox. Living a Christ-like life – living a life we are intended to live, requires some radical shift in mind set.

In Chapter 8:35 When he **first** spoke of his suffering, he told them, that the one who tries to save their life will ultimately lose it, but the one who loses their life for his sake will save it. Now he presents them with another paradox: The one who wants to be first must become last of all and servant of all.

The disciples still have visions of grandeur and really have no plans about becoming servants, who are at everybody’s beck and call. They suffer from puffed-up ambition – how will they ever be ready, to take up a cross, and follow a suffering servant Messiah?

So, to help them understand, Jesus places a little child in their midst and announces: “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me.”

Jesus does not set up the child as a model to be imitated. In his culture there was no romanticized notions about children. They were not regarded as especially obedient, trusting, simple, innocent, pure, unself-conscious, or humble. No, the point of comparison is the **insignificance** of the child on the honour scale. The child had no power, no status, and few rights. A child was dependent, vulnerable, entirely subject to the authority of their father.

Jesus chooses such an insignificant child, to represent those who are needy and lowly.

To be great in God's kingdom, we should shower attention on those who are regarded as insignificant, as Jesus himself has done. Jesus requires his "great" disciples to show humble service for the lowly.

Jesus follows this up with yet another paradox:

When his followers serve those without any status, they receive Jesus and the One who sent him. The greatest thing they can do is serve those who are forgotten and regarded as insignificant—those who have no influence, no titles, no priority, and no importance... except to God. Mark pictures a community where no one is to be treated either as a kingpin or as a nonentity.

The disciples can hide nothing from their Master, even when they try to cover up their quarrels and secret ambitions with silence. Jesus knows that each wants to rule the roost and that they have been arguing about the pecking order. Their quarrel over greatness allows him to redefine how one measures greatness.

This section of scripture teaches that the Christian community should exemplify a spirit of lowliness, instead of swaggering cockiness,
The acceptance of others instead of exclusion,
humble service instead of haughty insolence,
and harmonious relations instead of strife and division.

The disciples' behaviour serves as a negative example for readers to learn... what not to do.

All followers of Christ must learn how God ranks things.

God evaluates persons differently, from the way people do in our world.

We tend to look at such things as heritage, rank, wealth, and position;

God looks for self-giving service. Anyone who wants to be first in God's eyes must become the slave of all.

Whoever puts himself or herself first will become last. God longs for us to be in harmony with one another.

Those who engage in petty disputes with others may have forgotten who the enemy is and how easily that enemy can infiltrate behind the lines to disrupt the plan of battle with clever distractions. When we become embroiled in disputes with others and within our own ranks, we cannot win the battle with the real enemy.

Jesus has constantly avoided self-acclamation, but his disciples are all too ready to exalt themselves over others. If Jesus directed the same question to contemporary followers that he asked his first disciples, "What were you arguing about on the road?" the answer will be no less embarrassing. Christians still jockey for prominence. The unbridled will to power, still surfaces in local churches and in denominational politics. I've seen it and I'm sure you've all seen it destroying fellowship and demolishing Christian love. Little has changed.

As we enter vacancy, let's remember these words of Jesus. Let's become servants of all. If you don't receive full recognition for the service you have given, please forgive, rejoice and know that you are welcomed by the Father. As it says in Matthew 6 – 'your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.'

Let us aspire to be like those who work selflessly in our church and in our community, doing anything that is asked of us, and not being offended if not asked. Jesus requires “great” disciples to show humble service to all.

So, as you start looking for a new vicar, you might like to reflect on previous priests from the past whilst keeping this passage in Mark 9 in mind.

There will be many qualities you will be hoping for in a new vicar and no doubt, when you find someone, you think, would be a good fit, you will take up references. References which are often written by peers or superiors. It might be wise to consult those who have worked under their leadership, maybe the parish administrator or the caretaker.

Jesus’ teaching here is clear that real greatness, means caring about people – not those who are regarded as important but just simply, people. Programmes and organisation are important, of course, but my prayers for this church - is that during the vacancy we will all work together and continue to reach out to those on the margins ...and for the future, that God already has in mind, someone to lead this church with humble authority.

As James writes: *‘Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in humility that comes from wisdom. Submit yourselves then to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.’*

Let’s pray.