

Greatness in the Kingdom (Mark 9: 30-37)

Jesus Again Foretells His Death and Resurrection

30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.'³² But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Who Is the Greatest?

33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'³⁶ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

(Translation © Lawrence Moore, *Mark for Missional Disciples*, Walking the Walk Publications, 2018)

Commentary

Mark 9:30 begins a new section in which Jesus unpacks the Way of the Cross further. Let's stake stock for a moment. Jesus has announced a regime change: God is taking over. He terms this revolution, "the Kingdom of God". Jesus' messianic role is to call time on Rome. The world that is shaped by Caesar has no future. It cannot be "fixed" or even converted; it will be swept away by God, as the empires of Caesar's biblical forbears (Egypt and Babylon) were. This revolution will not be brought about by armed revolt, but by harvesting the "seeds" of the Kingdom producing 30, 60 and 100 times what was sown (see the Parable of the Sower in chapter 4).

Jesus has called into being a messianic community (the disciples). They are called to live in the world as though it were already the Kingdom – ruled by God, rather than Caesar. They are to be part of the revolution. This is not unique. It is the role that Israel is expected to play as the elect People of God. The different religious groupings in Jesus' day (eg Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots and Essenes) had different

strategies for accomplishing this revolution. What is unique is the Jesus announces that the road to the Kingdom is the Way of the Cross. And as he has already made clear at Caesarea Philippi (8:27ff), it is a road that will lead to suffering and death.

That particular terminus is inevitable, because Jesus is not advocating some sort of pious asceticism – some sort of withdrawal from the world and its conflicts. The Way of the Cross involves a concrete political choice of resistance to oppression by the political and religious powers. He has already introduced his followers to the uncomfortable truth that they are following a Messiah who will be crucified for his resistance and refusal to compromise; now he will go on to teach them about servanthood. Discipleship of Jesus involves following the way of nonviolence, which is at the heart of servanthood.

Incomprehension and resistance

Jesus opens this section of Mark's narrative with the second passion prediction. Tellingly, the disciples' response is incomprehension (v32). They misunderstand, not because Jesus is speaking Martian, but because his words make no sense to them. They do not have the imaginative capacity even to entertain the thought that this journey is going to end badly. It's as though Jesus announced, "The Internet will cease to function next Friday, and within three days, you'll have forgotten that there was ever such a thing as email!"

We need to be careful here not to dismiss the disciples' puzzlement too quickly. The Way of the Cross and suffering servanthood runs contrary to anything they have ever known, believed or hoped. They assume that "being on Jesus' side" is a guarantee of survival and success. It is incomprehensible to them that Jesus could fail – much less, knowingly fail! If the likelihood of failure is as high as Jesus appears to be suggesting, it makes no sense whatsoever for Jesus to persist in this particular journey. Prudence dictates that he opts for one of the three obvious strategies open to him: change the message, make a deal, or quite simply, don't go to Jerusalem! It's not in their minds now, but there's always the Judas Option if Jesus does insist on going through with it all: sell him out. Or abandon him.

Mark doesn't tell us this story to say, "Goodness, but the disciples are dense, aren't they? How can they fail to get it?" He wants us to recognize that these are the blindnesses that are common to every band of would-be followers of Jesus. The Way of the Cross and of servanthood defies prudence, logic and self-interest. It is at least masochistic, if not downright suicidal. The threat triggers every instinct for survival. This isn't the journey we've signed up for.

We're meant to recognize the same dynamics of resistance to Jesus' call, every temptation that drives our survivalism, every instinct to work out some alternative ourselves, every inclination towards compromise, abandonment and betrayal that the disciples exhibit. Their journey to Jerusalem now becomes the occasion for Jesus to unpack what discipleship really means. The road ("the way") now becomes the metaphor for The Way of the Cross.

The question of power

What does power look like through the lens of servanthood? It is the opposite of self-importance and self-advancement. It is the opposite of "power-over". Jesus' second announcement of his forthcoming passion provokes an extraordinary response from the disciples: they spend the next stretch of the road ("the way") arguing about who was the greatest.

Mark structures the narrative to emphasise the irony: Jesus is talking about the Way of the Cross and the disciples are talking about the way of greatness. Jesus is talking about losing one's life in order to find it; the disciples are talking about ensuring their survival. Jesus is talking about a Kingdom brought about through suffering non-violence and servant leadership; the disciples are plotting a kingdom that comes through political and military power. Mark uses the same narrative device in the next chapter: the third passion prediction is followed immediately by the plot by James and John to secure themselves the prime cabinet roles in the Kingdom (10: 32-45)!

Jesus chooses a child to be the object lesson he wants the disciples to learn. The point about a child is that the child is the most powerless person in the household. Children had no obvious sources of power: political, military, economic or religious. Unlike the disciples, they lacked agency: they could not bring about the Kingdom themselves. That is why they could receive it entirely as gift and grace from Jesus.

The disciples were corrupted by power. They want the Kingdom without the cross. They refuse to accept Jesus' terms. That is what they need to unlearn from the child. It is only as they forego power as a means to ensuring their own interests that they will discover the Kingdom as undeserved gift.

Of course, what we will learn on Easter Sunday is servanthood and non-violence is not the renunciation of power, but of exploitative, destructive forms of power. It is actively to embrace a very different sort of power: the power of servanthood; of suffering non-violence; of love; of forgiveness; of resurrection.

Going deeper into the text (Mark 9: 30-37)

Presenting a child as an object lesson, Jesus now extends the second call to discipleship in different terms: If anyone desires to follow behind me let that one take up the cross... (5:34). If anyone desires to be first let that one be last among everyone and a servant of everyone. (9:35)

The church is not to be a power base for its members but a community that redistributes power to the excluded. This point is underlined in the next episode. John boasts that he forbade an exorcist who was not "following us" to practice (9:33). Are you jealous for me? "Powerful practices," argues Jesus, should be welcomed wherever they occur, for those "not against us are for us" (Mark 9:39f). By expanding the "us," Jesus undermines any attempt by the church to claim an exclusive franchise over the practice of justice and compassion. He understands the relationship between the power of monopoly and the monopoly of power! To

sharpen the point. Jesus reminds "Christians" that they will often be on the receiving end of the works of mercy.

This reminded me of the speech when Delaney Tarr, a survivor of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas high school shooting, tells lawmakers she and her peers want stricter gun legislation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMmZ49vzBbl>

Jesus presented a child in the Mark's reading, and in the context of the American shooting, the young people serve the nation by campaigning for stricter gun laws. These young people don't want the government's "thoughts and prayers", they want to see change.

How can the church learn from these young people?

How can the church stand in solidarity with their practice of justice and compassion?

Do we stand on the receiving end of works of mercy or do we often think we as the church have the monopoly of compassion and justice?

How can the church engage with the secular world?

All age worship ideas (Mark 9: 30-37)

One of the keys to good all age worship is to keep it simple and relatively short.

Ideally aim for a service of 45-50 minutes. That's not to say a service can't be longer but if you are thinking of 1hr30+ think carefully about your use of space and above all else be creative, take risks and have fun – partying is integral to the kingdom but we'll leave that for a year on Luke...

Background - This is the Messiah but not as you know it. In this passage Jesus turns the disciples thinking upside down. They are discussing who is the greatest, who has the highest status, or who is the nearest to Jesus. Every culture has an understanding of status. There's the old phrase 'It's not what you know it's who you know.' Jesus' challenge to his friends is it's not even about who you know but how you follow.

Jesus is not Caesar. The disciples are not great because they are close to him. The kingdom he brings, the kind of royalty he offers is equally available to those with the least status, like a child.

The child to the disciples would have been unimportant, irrelevant even, but to Jesus this child embodies those with the greatest importance in the kingdom. Jesus is saying to be close to him, and therefore God, is to welcome the least, the last, the lost. Not pursuing greatness by association or basking in reflected glory but embracing service. This Christ is not creating a government equal to the Romans but is establishing a kingdom that turns that kind of understanding on its head. This kingdom is less in human understanding but much greater in cosmic understanding and will contribute significantly to the eventual downfall of Rome. A reign of compassion, justice and selfless serving that affirms life for all but first for those who are denied the fullest experience of it will outlive every other kind of 'great and powerful' nation or empire.

Ideas – Have a series of pictures of famous faces. Some supermarkets and costume or joke shops sell inexpensive cardboard masks. Also have an image or mask of a baby. Ask who is the most important and why? Get people to call out their answers and give reason. Open it up for debate.

Alternatively – have a line up of 5 or 6 people and a rubber dinghy. The people are: a Macmillan nurse; a heart surgeon; a politician with a passion for equality and justice; a visionary teacher starting in a failing school; a youth and children's worker in an area of high deprivation; a street-homeless asylum seeker. There's only room for four people. Who get's left? Perhaps get two mixed-age groups to select their four. Then ask the congregation if they agree. See where it goes.

One of the biggest challenges is that there is arguably only one person in the line-up without any status yet the grace which Jesus embodies and speaks of determines them to be the most important of all. Ultimately there is no right or wrong answer

though if we are serious about welcoming and following Jesus then any group should include the one with the least status.

Liturgies and hymns Mark 2: 1-12

This is where you can find hymn suggestions and liturgies for use with this week's text.



Jesus asked them, "What were you discussing on the road?" The silence was deafening—they had been arguing with one another over who among them was

greatest. He sat down and summoned the Twelve. "So you want first place? Then take the last place. Be the servant of all." He put a child in the middle of the room. Then, cradling the little one in his arms, he said, "Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me—God who sent me." (The Message)

Here's a contemporary call to worship litany based on Mark 9:33-37. It was written by Katherine Hawker.

Contemporary Call to Worship Litany

(inspired by Mark 9:33-37)

The first shall be last.

We come to worship as we are.

The last shall be first.

We come with confidence.

The first shall be last.

We come with questions.

The last shall be first.

We come burdened by failure.

The first shall be last.

We come celebrating success.

The last shall be first.

We come fearful of the future.

The first shall be last

And the last shall be first

And a little child shall lead them.

A prayer, that works well with different voices

God of Hope and Joy

In your greatness you call all to seek those who are lost,

Forgotten and isolated.

God of light and strength,

By your Grace you call us all to be together

To journey our understanding of the Way.

Show us all the way forward

Into this world you love,

To be your hands and heart,

To respond with willingness and humility,

To love and share as you have loved and shared.

Send us all to the edges,

Give us all the grace to stand beside

Those who are voiceless, marginalised and rejected,

Those who experience pain and hardship,

Loneliness and grief, coldness and hunger.

Show us all how to care, how to listen,

How to respond, how to love, how to proclaim and liberate.

Lead all who serve in your name so that in being

Your hands and heart,

We may ever faithfully walk in your Spirit.

Amen

Adapted from UnitingCare Launch Prayer

Can I commend this website as a resource that has loads of interesting stuff on it.

<http://sacredise.com/category/liturgies/> and here is a prayer that is typical of what can be found:

Though you are God,

With all the influence and status that the name implies,

You refused to pull rank,

And parade your power among us.

Instead, you chose to step down into our experience,
Living among us, as one of us,
With all the struggle and suffering
That goes with being human.

More than that, you adopted the role of slave,
Washing feet, serving people of no reputation or social standing,
And giving of yourself completely.

As incredible as it sounds,
You are the God who serves,
And we can respond in no other way
Than to give ourselves to you in praise.
Amen