

23 September 2012 – Wesley 10.30am and St Aidan's – Pentecost 17

Theme: "Who is the greatest?" – Mark 9:30-37

Text: "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." says Jesus. (vs 37)

Introduction

Mark's Gospel has a series of comments by Jesus about his impending death that the disciples do not seem to understand let alone heed. Note that this section is particularly for and with the disciples. We read,

'Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. (vs30b)

Three times Mark uses the words that Jesus will be betrayed, handed over or delivered up into human hands. Here, at the beginning of today's Gospel, is one of those passages. Jesus says, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men." (vs 31a)

The words "Son of Man" is the most common title Jesus uses for himself and is found 81 times in the Gospels. It comes from Daniel 7:13-14 where the Son of Man is pictured as a heavenly figure who in the end times is entrusted by God with authority, glory and sovereign power. Jesus used it of himself to make it clear his role, his mission to mankind. Yet along-side of that is the fact that the Son of Man must undergo suffering, be rejected, be killed and rise again. This is all part of the divine plan. This is what the disciples did not understand but Jesus keeps repeating what will happen to himself and couches it in Hebrew imagery that will later be understood. However at this stage the disciples fail to comprehend the enormity of what will occur and they seem more interested in 'what they can get out of it for themselves'. Sound familiar?! This then leads into the discussion about greatness and welcoming even the least among us, the children. Let us look at this section of the Gospel.

Mark 9:33-37

Jesus now catches the disciples in an argument over 'who is the greatest'. Competition for power, wealth and prestige infected all of the cultures included in the Roman Empire. Things haven't changed much, even today with all our advances. There is still that desire to be number one and look after number one in our society. This is even part of our church culture to some extent. It is a little paradoxical for Jesus here because he has been talking about his suffering, death and then resurrection and now the disciples are arguing over greatness. In a sense, Jesus then talks to them of the different forms that greatness may take, and it is not what they would have expected. "If anyone wants to be first, he or she must be the very last, and the servant of all." (vs 35) The word for servant in the Greek is '*diakonos*' and literally means someone who serves meals. The person who was 'servant of all' was the lowest in rank of all servants – the one who would be allowed to eat only what was left after everyone else had eaten their fill. This could be something or nothing at all. Not a role that you would associate with greatness but Jesus teaches the disciples that this is his and hence their role as followers of him. From this word we have the '*diaconate*' which is the ministry of service to others and in the Uniting Church we now call these people 'deacons'. There is a service role within the community.

Then follow the concluding verses in 36/7 which to modern readers seem strange and are often misrepresented due to misunderstanding of the cultural and theological context in which Jesus shares them with his disciples.

"He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.'"

This appears to be an abrupt change of subject from 'servant' to 'child'. However Mark's Greek speaking audience would have made the connection relatively quickly due to language and culture. Mark's audience would have heard the word 'child' as referring to someone like a servant who served meals to everyone as neither a child nor a servant had any social standing. A child did not contribute much if anything to the economic value of a household or community and a child could do little to enhance one's position in the struggles for prestige or influence. Children and servants were of equally low social status.

It is with this knowledge and understanding that both the coherence and offensiveness of Jesus' teaching becomes clear. Not only is Jesus himself said to honour and welcome a mere child (vs 36) but the saying in verse 37 equates one's welcome of such a child with welcoming Jesus himself – and even more, with welcoming the God who sent him.

This passage then is far from the delightful scene, often depicted with Jesus cuddling a child in a pictorial Sunday School sweet way, which misrepresents what Jesus was saying. Instead, it is a powerful and even shocking depiction of the paradoxical values of God's will and reign, which confront the dominant values of human societies and assign worth and importance to every person, not simply the rich, powerful and greatest.

Quite a different perspective on "who is the greatest", which challenges our worldly values and seeks to turn upside down our worldly thinking parameters. This is a constant challenge as we seek to live out our faith in a world with different base values to those being taught by Christ.

Also welcoming children has rightly been transposed to mean helping the most vulnerable in our society and allowing openness to them.

Conclusion

If we are to take this passage seriously, and I believe we need to, who then are 'the greatest among us'? An interesting question to ponder upon!

Without a doubt for me are those involved in a 'diaconate' ministry – those who have become 'the servant of all'. It doesn't mean that they are totally subservient to the world but rather look out for the powerless, the downtrodden, the outcaste and those on the fringes of society. Quite a different take on 'who is the greatest?'.

Let me conclude with a story of one of the former patrol ministers that I know well – Judy Knowing, who only recently moved from the mining community of Tom Price in the Pilbara after serving there for more than 9 years. She is now the Chaplain at the Royal Adelaide Hospital in South Australia.

Judy is a Deacon within the Uniting Church. Going to a mining town both as a single woman and a clergyperson was quite a challenge for her. Early in her time there she became quite involved in the community caring for the women, especially those from overseas or who were in abusive circumstances. She and the local Catholic Sister became good friends and worked together to support those struggling as well as the families of the miners. They did this as 'peripheral duties' to their main roles but their work was noticed by the community. I recall Judy being quite 'taken aback' when the manager of the mine invited her to come and have afternoon tea with him because he had heard of the work that she and the Catholic sister had been doing to support the families of those in the iron ore mining community. He wanted to thank them for their support of his staff and for what they were doing 'in the background' caring for the families and particularly the women, quite a few who were from overseas countries and were struggling to cope in a new country and a remote, difficult mining town.

Judy, for me, was living out the Gospel imperative that Jesus was teaching here to his disciples:

"Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me;
and who-ever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

May we learn to live out this teaching of Jesus.