

22 September 2024 Mark 9:30-37 Pastor Fraser Pearce

Out of all the guests you could welcome to your home,
From all of history and from any country,
Who would you most like to receive?
Let's say you could welcome someone justly famous,
It wouldn't just be interesting for you,
It would also be a great honour - by welcoming them,
You would share in their glory, and be built up by their company.
That's how it is in the human community: our status is enhanced
As we welcome those who are honoured and respected.

The Good News from today's Gospel reading
Is that as disciples of Christ, we have the opportunity
To welcome *God* into our lives, and so to share in the status
That we both desire and need in our lives as human beings.
The mystery is that we are honoured in God's kingdom –
That we share in the glory that is God's –
As we welcome those who seem insignificant in the world's eyes,
But who are sent to us by God.

Let's get into today's reading: **[Jesus and his disciples] went on from [the house] and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for 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.'**

In the first half of Mark's Gospel Jesus has been baptised,
He has begun proclaiming the kingdom of God, and has called his disciples;
He has healed the sick, cast out unclean spirits; he has fed the hungry,
And he has taught the crowds in parables.

He is, in modern terms, a celebrity,
And the disciples could be forgiven for thinking that,
As people called to be with Jesus, their future is bright.
But from chapter 8 things change: Jesus begins to foretell privately,
To his disciples, his suffering, death, and resurrection.
Here in chapter 9 Jesus foretells his death and resurrection
A second time, but just as St Peter misunderstood Jesus the first time,
So now his disciples together fail to grasp what Jesus is talking about.

This is what we read in the text: **But [Jesus' disciples] did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.**

They were afraid to ask him...

The text does not say why they were afraid; we have to think about it.

Going back to your school days: were you ever afraid

To ask your teacher a question when you didn't understand?

Why was that? What was going on?

Maybe we are afraid because we don't want to appear stupid –

Especially if we have to admit it in front of the class:

No one else seems to have trouble in getting it, we think to ourselves,

So, we're better off keeping our mouth shut.

It can be even worse if we think that we'll get in trouble

For saying the wrong thing – that happened to St Peter the last time

That Jesus talked about his suffering, death, and resurrection:

Jesus rebuked him, saying 'Get behind me Satan...'

But just because his students are afraid to ask

Doesn't make Jesus a bad teacher.

He has what you could call a rabbinic strategy in mind:

He has a question to ask them that will help them understand.

Listen to how the reading goes on: **Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?'**

Notice first of all that this is an in-house question:

This is behind closed doors, so no one is unnecessarily humiliated.

And he doesn't pick on one student, the dullest student,

But gives a question for the group:

He asks what they were talking about *on the way*.

The way is not just any road or track, but *the way to the cross*:

Jesus teaches his disciples, in other words, by asking them

What they were talking about as they followed him

To his rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection.

Now listen to how the reading goes on: **But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.**

What do you think the nature of their argument was?

I get the impression it would have been things like:

Jesus chose me first, what do you think that means?

Or: Jesus takes us aside to be with him for special ministry,
Like healing the daughter of the leader of the synagogue,
Do you think he has us in line for future promotion?

Or: Jesus speaks most to me as a friend, not just a star student,
There are confidences I could share, but I would never do that...
Whatever the case, they sense that their argument has been foolish,
And Jesus needs to bring them back on to the right path.

Consider the body language in what happens next: **[Jesus] sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'**

The first thing he does is sit down:

This is the posture of authoritative teaching.

We get this in places like the Sermon on the Mount:

In the ancient world for a teacher to sit down to teach,
Was to deliver instruction in the weightiest way.

More than this, Jesus *calls* them.

This is, if you like, a recalling of the twelve back on the right path,
Following behind as true disciples.

Now, the interesting thing is that Jesus does not chastise them

For wanting to be great, even for wanting to be first,

But he does assure them that in the kingdom of God

True greatness does not consist in exalting oneself,

But in putting oneself in the position of servant, of minister.

To make his point clear, he teaches in actions, and not just words.

Listen to how the narrative develops: **Then [Jesus] took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'**

The first thing Jesus does is put the child in their midst.

In our world those who are weak or poor or seemingly useless

Are invisible: it's the wealthy, the attractive, the intelligent

That we naturally fix our gaze on.

But Jesus puts the child at the centre,

And then he takes the child in his arms: seeing the child,

And welcoming the child.

He then assures his disciples that whoever welcomes
Even one such child in his name doesn't simply welcome the child,
But welcomes Jesus himself, and that whoever welcomes Jesus,
Welcomes God the Father.
So, the child, in his or weakness and seeming insignificance,
Is an ambassador of Jesus.

Notice, by the way, one detail that is easy to miss: Jesus said,
'Whoever welcomes one such child *in my name* welcomes me...'

Welcoming the child *in Jesus' name* –

With his mindset; in the way that he welcomed children.

We know that in this world those with power

Can 'welcome' little ones in an abusive way,

And in fact, in a few verses Jesus will warn his disciples

Of the dire consequences that await those who would cause

One of the little ones to stumble on the way.

He says, **'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones
who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung
around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.'**

But the Good News is that as we welcome the little ones *in his name*,

Seeing them; protecting them; honouring them; nurturing them,

We are hosting Jesus, and we so welcome the Father who sent him.

And in this the mystery of the Kingdom of God is revealed:

We share in the status we desire as human beings,

Humbling ourselves in terms of worldly glory,

But letting God lift us up to honoured life in his kingdom.

One last thing, and perhaps the deepest Good News from our reading:

In relation to God, we are all children:

We are vulnerable to the assaults of the evil one,

We have nothing to offer God, and everything to receive,

And our Lord Jesus Christ receives us in his mercy

And brings us to the Father.

So let us welcome each other as God in Christ has welcomed us,

And let us especially welcome those who are invisible in this world,

And who cannot repay us, for it is God who honours us as we receive those

Who are honoured by him. In Jesus' name. Amen.