

## **Peel - 22nd September 2024 - Mark 9: 30-37**

In the Gospel reading appointed for today, St Mark demonstrates for us that the expectation that Christ was to suffer and die was very much upon our Lord's mind during the last days of his Galilean ministry, as Mark relates what is happening to Jesus during the middle chapters of his Gospel account. In the chapter before this, in chapter 8 verse 33, we heard the announcement of the Passion as Jesus and his disciples walked together high up in the hills at Caesarea Philippi and immediately afterwards, our Lord had to explain to his followers what discipleship meant.

In today's Gospel reading, a chapter further on, and back in the Galilee area, we hear Jesus continuing to discuss these matters with his disciples, making the point that he was deliberately avoiding the crowds so that he could teach his immediate followers alone. Again, in chapter 9 verse 31 he speaks of his coming Passion, and as they come to Capernaum and enter a house there, very much away from others, he recognises their continuing ignorance over aspects of what it means to be a follower, knowing that they are discussing who is the greatest among them. The reminder that even the disciples required continuous correction and

encouragement, gives us some comfort when we recognise our own times of failure and dullness of apprehension as to what our Lord requires of us, with the need for constant repetition of the underlying teaching.

Rolling on another chapter to chapter 10: 32-34 and the little band is now on its way up to Jerusalem, and once again Jesus tells the twelve what is going to happen to him. The blindness of the disciples as to what is occurring is emphasised in this latter case by James and John coming to him, and even at that late stage of their instruction, asking if places at his right and left hand side might be secured for them.

So, coming back to today's Gospel text, we see our Lord placing a child in the midst of his followers and taking him in his arms, and within this context of his repeated teaching and the constant misunderstanding by the disciples. It is possible, and the evidence suggests, even likely, that whilst they were hearing, they weren't really listening. Again this provides a reminder to us, in our day and amidst busy lives of the potential loss of focus, fragility of commitment, and the dangers of distraction - and, this demonstration of the waywardness of the disciple's thought, illustrates the need for repetition of teaching.

As we hear passages of Scripture read, do we really listen? Does having the text in front of us help our concentration, or not? That's one for each individual to answer. We can read without taking anything in, in the same way as we can hear something said while our mind is somewhere else. Mark, in his insistent repetition of similar passages in different contexts, is creating a pattern of Christ's efforts to instil his ways into the hearts of his followers, that will all unfold as the Cross looms.

But today, in his reference to the child, he emphasises that one doesn't need to carry out every kind of religious exertion in order to find God, but be receptive, where one is, to the needs around one and, as one is able, to respond in his name, and experience joy at the same time, as we may on seeing a child in the midst of our gathering. But let us consider the disciples' distraction as it appears in the journey related in today's Gospel:

Then they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?"

Were they were concentrating on something of substance about the teaching of Jesus or the progress of their engagement with the message

and with the crowds who were their regular companions? Not at all, they were looking inwards at themselves. They were a group of young men, probably quite conscious of their prowess and doing a little bit of metaphorical arm wrestling.

What were you arguing about on the way?

Jesus when conscious of his disciples talking about who was the greatest, took the example of the child, not out of sentimentality, but surely to provide the degree of contrast that might lift the blinkers from the eyes of his disciples. It should not be lost on us that those who argued about these things were those who could claim to be closest to him, and were conscious that they were chosen and as a result, stood in some respect above the crowd.

In this chapter 9 of St Mark's Gospel, alone, there is a procession of events involving the disciples, that led to words needing to be said in response by Jesus. Christ had to correct what Peter, James and John were receiving from the vision they experienced on the Mount of Transfiguration; the other disciples, meanwhile, had thought that they could solve the turmoil surrounding a stricken boy and they found that

they could do nothing until Jesus came, and once more had to put them right; then the disciples thought their argument about greatness was quite legitimate and natural, until shown by our Lord that it was entirely wrong and in reality they should have been thinking the other way round, and the chapter finishes by Jesus showing his followers just how courageous was their decision – and what they needed to be - to remain his disciples.

The testing of our vocation is not something done once in our lives. Testing the disciples was happening day by day as they accompanied Jesus, and for them and us, testing is a kind of fulcrum that maintains the balance between our energy and our temptation. The disciples had both of these things to manage, whilst trying to be committed followers of their Lord. It is no different for us. We must refer ourselves again and again to the teaching of Christ, whilst the changing consequences of twenty-first century society stretch our abilities to cope to the maximum, and in some cases tragically sweep away what has been the precious gift of God in our lives.

Prayer, and the gifts of discernment that come with life in the Spirit are in no way devalued by the application of this fulcrum, this testing of our faith and renewal of our understanding of the teaching of Christ, which

simply presents a sensitive resting point for the plank of our inspiration and action. It is one of the most encouraging aspects of the disciples' faith journey in the New Testament that, with the ultimate exception of Judas Iscariot, they seemed to take correction so readily, and so often. But it is a sobering thought, that Christ's followers are constantly in need of being brought back to see things through his eyes, and to challenge their own values and views, but it is encouraging as well, and offers us joy and release in discipleship in knowing that we are not alone, but part of a great multitude of the saints of God who have trodden this path before us!

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