

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Reflection – 16th Sunday after Trinity

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It is interesting that this week's gospel is the next chapter after last week's gospel reading which, you may remember, began with Jesus asking his disciples who they thought he was. Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah or the Christ'. Jesus did not comment on this but asked the disciples not to tell anyone probably because Jesus knew that they were still so very far from understanding who he really was, what his true mission was and how that should be accomplished. He also had much more teaching to do. Jesus went on to say "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" The key words here are to 'deny ourselves' and as we explored in the Luberon last week, to deny ourselves means to cease making self the object of one's life and actions.

Today's gospel picks up from that message with the disciples demonstrating that they apparently had not understood that message as they were arguing amongst themselves who of their group was the greatest which, when you think about it, was a pretty dumb thing to do given that they had Jesus on the team. The ever-patient Jesus calls them to Him, sits them down, calls a child to Himself and uses the example of the child to illustrate what living His message truly meant.

But let us back up and give today's gospel some context. It occurs within the second major section of Mark (8:22-10:52), a section that contains a threefold pattern that appears three times namely, Jesus predicts his passion and resurrection, the disciples don't understand, and Jesus then gives the disciples further teachings. Most notably, this section starts and ends with accounts of blind people who are given sight. And perhaps this is a clue as to what this section is trying to explain. Last week Peter recognised that Jesus was more than a reformer, more than a miracle worker, more than a prophet and no ordinary rabbi. Yet still the disciples did not understand. Verse 32 of today's gospel tells us as much. But as the blind man is given sight, however gradually, so the disciples, who are blind to Jesus' mission and identity, are given sight, albeit gradually. Knowing and not knowing, understanding and not understanding are woven throughout these chapters.

It's not just that the disciples do not understand some piece of information. It's that they do not understand the fundamental truth at the very heart of the Incarnation. How is it possible for the Messiah, who was expected to free Israel from their Gentile oppressors, purify the people, and restore Israel's independence and glory, suffer and die? How can the Son of God die and, furthermore, why should it happen?

Sadly, as verse 32 also tells us, the disciples were afraid to ask Jesus to explain. We can speculate why this may have been. Perhaps they were too embarrassed to ask given that Jesus had explained several times already. They had been the closest of everybody to Jesus and the closer we are to Jesus, the more we are supposed to know (about God, about prayer, about the Bible, about religious stuff), right? Just

ask any priest! Or perhaps the disciples had a sixth sense as to what the answers would be and their distress at his teaching was so deep that they were not yet ready to accept or cope with that. We all want a Saviour who conquers enemies, not one who suffers and dies.

So, what happens when the disciples fail to ask the difficult questions? They turn to arguing with each other, squabbling among themselves over their rank and status. It is likely that they were truly embarrassed when Jesus asked them what they had been talking about for they kept quiet and did not tell him. If they were ashamed of their obsession with greatness maybe it was a healthy sense of shame and perhaps indicated that some of the message of Jesus was sinking into their hearts.

The response of Jesus was to call his disciples to him and sit down (the posture of a teaching rabbi). I can't help imagining that the disciples were a little nervous at this moment, perhaps anticipating a good telling off, for hadn't Jesus called Peter Satan earlier? Jesus could have started by saying "hey dummies, I am the greatest", but instead, Jesus says, "if anyone wants to be first, he must be last, and the servant of all". Of course, Jesus is the greatest in the kingdom. So, when He said last and servant, He was really describing Himself, accurately expressing His nature. He was truly first yet made Himself last of all and servant of all for our sake.

And to be last of all is the challenge that Jesus is giving us. The desire to be praised and to gain recognition should be foreign to a follower of Jesus. Jesus wants us to embrace last as a choice, allowing others to be preferred before us, and not only because we may be forced to be last.

To illustrate this, Jesus draws a child into the group and says "whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me". In any culture, children are vulnerable; they are dependent on others for their survival and well-being. In the ancient world, their vulnerability was magnified by the fact that they had no legal protection. They were regarded more as property than individuals. A child had no

status, no rights. A child certainly had nothing to offer anyone in terms of honour or status. But it is precisely these little ones with whom Jesus identifies.

Children are not threatening. When we have a tough, intimidating presence, we aren't like Jesus. Children are not good at deceiving. They don't do a very good job at fooling their parents. When we are good at hiding ourselves and deceiving others, we aren't like Jesus.

Jesus' rejoinder to the disciples' bickering over rank is another paradoxical assertion that turns social assumptions inside out. Just as we learnt last week that the saving of one's life requires us to lose it in a sacrifice for the gospel's sake, so too does primacy in discipleship demand taking a place last of all, as everyone's servant. This top-to-bottom reversal of rank realigns how we as Christians should receive those whom we have mistakenly regarded as beneath ourselves.

I have just given you the usual, standard interpretation of this text but there is something else in addition to the challenge that this text gives us and that is the good news and encouragement that Jesus welcomes us even when we do not understand or do not know. We mentioned earlier that knowing and not knowing, understanding and not understanding are woven throughout these chapters. This episode closes with Jesus taking the child in His arms and embracing the child, the ultimate symbol of not knowing, not understanding, immature and undeveloped. So, whilst responding to the challenge Jesus has given us and often failing, we need not fear our questions, our not knowing, our lack of understanding or misunderstandings, our confusion or our curiosity in the presence of Jesus whose perfect love casts out all fear.

Amen.