

Proper 20 (B)

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 19 September 2021

Readings: James 3.13-4.3, 7-8a; Mark 9.30-37

There are some characteristics of St Mark's gospel, such as the pace at which Mark moves through Jesus' life and ministry, and Jesus' many requests that the disciples do not talk about his teaching, the so-called 'Messianic secret'. Another is his frequent reference to the disciples' lack of understanding. At times, the disciples are depicted as confused, challenged, and even discouraged by Jesus' exhortations and teachings. For example, in today's gospel passage, Mark reports that after Jesus predicts his passion, the disciples did not understand what he was saying to them and were afraid to ask.

This isn't the first time the disciples have heard Jesus predict these events. In last week's gospel reading, Jesus speaks about his coming passion, his suffering, and he is rebuked by Peter. Jesus responds by rebuking Peter himself and saying, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things'.

Perhaps we can only begin to understand the disciples' incomprehension, their fear of asking Jesus to explain himself, and their subsequent argument over who among them is the greatest, if we can appreciate the disciples' state of mind, as Jesus has previously described it: their minds are not set on divine things but on human things.

Yet that is understandable. The disciples have left behind their families, their previous occupations, and all they owned to follow Jesus. They have seen Jesus heal the sick, cast out demons, and give life to the dead. And they have personally found a new purpose, a new mission in life as followers of Jesus. But now, they cannot see beyond Jesus' plain words. All they can hear is that everything they have witnessed, will soon come to an end.

The disciples cannot wrap their heads around what Jesus is saying, not because they believe Jesus is exempt from suffering and death, but because they believe that his death will mark the end of their lives as they have known them. They are afraid of losing their friend and their teacher, and they are afraid of what will happen to them in the process. The threat of Jesus' death was exactly that, a threat to them. As human being, they cannot easily see beyond that immediate, unpalatable, threat.

However, if we look at Jesus' words to the disciples, we see that Jesus does not just predict his passion and death. He is clear about his resurrection on the third day. There seems to be a disconnection between what Jesus is saying and what the disciples hear. Did the disciples stop listening to Jesus after the first half of his sentence? Was their anxiety so intense that they shut down and could not hear anything after the mention of death? Were they not curious about Jesus' resurrection? Was their fear so great that it caused them to not ask any more questions?

We do not know, and speculation can only take us so far. The disciples are not only confused but at a loss for words. They cannot take in what Jesus is saying. Mark tells us that on their journey to Capernaum, Jesus overheard the disciples arguing about who among them was the greatest. This was a topic of discussion the disciples were too embarrassed or afraid to admit to Jesus. When asked by Jesus, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' the disciples remained silent. However, Jesus knew what they were arguing about, just as he knew about the disciples' confusion and fear after hearing him speak on his passion, death, and resurrection.

But rather than giving the disciples a long explanation, or reprimanding them, Jesus acts out a parable. Jesus takes a child and puts the child among the disciples, and taking the child into his arms, Jesus tells his disciples, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

This was counter cultural. Children had no status and no legal rights at that time. There were high rates of infant mortality. Children were, frankly, expendable. So, Jesus is not simply

teaching a lesson about being child-like; he is speaking to the issue of status. Embracing children was entirely characteristic of Jesus, who accepted the least and the lowly without asking what benefit they could receive from such people. Placing a child in their midst, Jesus speaks directly to the disciples. Those who receive even a child receive Jesus, and those who receive Jesus receive the one who sent him.

All the previous argument and uncertainty is cast aside. By bringing a child in their midst, amid their concerns and disputes, Jesus reminds them what it means to be one of his disciples. Being a disciple of Jesus means embracing the beauty and complexity of human life, and yet at the same time having the strength and space to welcome others as we have been welcomed by Jesus. At times, being a disciple of Jesus requires that we put aside ourselves, our accomplishments, and aspirations, so that we may offer the same hospitality, love, and grace that Jesus offers to us. But it also means not being afraid to be child-like, accepting our vulnerability, and turning to others when we find ourselves in need of Jesus and cannot seem to feel his presence in the world.

Being a disciple of Jesus means setting our hearts and minds on divine things and not on human things.

However, in Jesus, divinity and humanity have met and have become one; and we follow Jesus Christ who is truly God and truly human, who understands the complexities of human life and yet demands more of us. He invites us to remain faithful to him, all while knowing that, at times, his way will lead us to confusion and suffering, and ultimately the cross. But that is never where the story ends. We know that there is a third day. A day of resurrection lies ahead for all of us who believe and follow in his way. For now, our calling is to remain faithful to him who promises to be with us during the hardships of life and to make all things new. There is no need to worry who among us is the greatest when we know that God, our helper and sustainer, knows us inside out and still loves us.