



Revd Ro's Reflection on The 16th Sunday after Trinity

Proper 20 Year B

James 3.13-4.3,7,8a

Mark 9.30-37

Whenever a passage read in church begins, 'They went on from there and passed through Galilee' it usually helps to know from where, or more importantly what has just happened. The passage has missed out the beginning of chapter 9. Last week Jesus was with the disciples around the foothills of Mount Hermon. What is recounted at the start of this chapter nine is the Transfiguration. It may have been on Mount Hermon or Jesus may have moved on.

You could say that Jesus has been taking the disciples metaphorically up the mountain of insight, trying to reveal the kingdom of God to them. Now Jesus takes Peter, James and John with him up the mountain literally and the other disciples are left behind. There on the mountain two figures appear with Jesus; Moses and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets. Moses was the law giver, who by God's hand, led the people to freedom in the Promised Land. Jesus is the fulfilment of the law who will free his people. They appear and Jesus is transfigured before the disciples. Peter once again blurts out the first thing that comes into his head to make the moment of wonder last. Peter is so human and Mark is happy to recount such a realistic detail. Remember the belief was that Elijah would appear before the coming of God's Messiah. Here Jesus is seen as Messiah, the fulfilment of the Scriptures. As at the baptism there comes the voice from heaven.

⁷"Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.'

Here is Jesus, God's Son and true Messiah, the disciples would not have understood his divinity, Mark does and he intends his readers to.

⁹ 'As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.'

Once again Jesus warns them not to say anything, we know that the powers that be are just waiting for an excuse to arrest him and there are scribes below arguing with the disciples. Jesus returns to find them trying to cast out a demon. The boy's father is desperate for him to be cured and says, 'if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.' ²³ Jesus said to him, 'If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.'

The certainty of Jesus echoes throughout this. He has the authority of God, that has just been seen on the mountain. Now he returns filled with power and tells the father of the boy he needs to have faith. The boy's father says something which we could all echo!

²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'

Jesus shows his power over the supernatural and the boy is cured.

Now we come to our passage with more insight. Jesus is not with a crowd; he is walking through Galilee with the disciples. Once more we are told, 'He did not want anyone to know it;' last week we saw Jesus revealing to the disciples that he would be killed, Peter after his moment of insight simply cannot accept Jesus' words and is rebuked. The disciples still do not understand – how should they? They believe he is the Messiah, the Messiah is a conqueror who will set God's people free- he must not be killed! How could he bring in the kingdom if he was? We cannot blame them. They do not understand Jesus' divinity much less what he will achieve for humanity on the cross and at the resurrection. They still do not understand what the kingdom of God really means. Mark has reached a turning point in his gospel, the cross looms nearer and Jesus tries again to explain what must happen.

'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.'

Jesus will rise from the dead, but we are told once more that the disciples did not understand and 'were afraid to ask.' Any Jew who believed in a resurrection would have echoed Martha's words at Bethany when Jesus asked if she believed her brother would rise from the dead,

'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.'

As yet they simply cannot comprehend Jesus' words, 'he will rise again.' Jesus is nearing Jerusalem and his final encounter with evil when he says to Martha,

²⁵ 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' ²⁷ She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

Jesus holds the key to eternal life; life lived in his way now, after death and at the new creation. The resurrection will show his divinity. The disciples still cannot see that and who can blame them; their mindset is so different.

In today's passage Mark once again gives his readers very specific details, 'Then they came to Capernaum' and we are told Jesus asked the disciples directly 'What were you arguing about on the way?' I expect they were pretty shame faced, we can see that from their reaction,

³⁴ 'But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.'

They are quite aware that they shouldn't have been arguing about it but they are showing ambition and desire for status. The desire to be more important than someone else is very deep rooted in human nature. The corollary being that more status will lead to power over others. It's potent and dangerous stuff that desire, as we shall see in our reading from James.

Has this argument been sparked because Jesus took Peter and James and John with him up the Mount of the Transfiguration while the rest were left behind? I wonder? Were they showing off or were the others moaning, we'll never know, but something sparked it.

The disciples do not admit what they were doing but Jesus knows anyway. It's worth pausing there to remember that Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves. A person may not admit something to others, maybe even try to fool themselves but you can hide nothing from God.

We think of James and John, later in Mark 10 after Jesus once again had prophesied his death,

³⁵ 'James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' ³⁶ And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' ³⁷ And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.'

What Jesus says next to the disciples sums up so much of his philosophy,

^{9.35} 'He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'

Jesus is bringing the message of God; he is bringing in God's new creation. The world's tinselled values will be turned upside down, the desire for power; status and ambition, for self-aggrandisement are not part of God's plan. The worldly values will be overthrown and God's kingdom values established on earth as in heaven. The disciples have to learn this and so do we. It is no good the disciples thinking that because they are Jesus' chosen band they therefore have special privileges or worldly status. Jesus spells this out with an illustration.

³⁶ 'Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them,

³⁷ 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

Children did not have any status; the disciples would have known this. Children would have been at the bottom of the social scale. We remember Jesus' words, 'the son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' They must understand that worldly values, selfishness and greed are the opposite of Jesus' way.

A child though, is loved by his family, just as God loves his children. All who accept Jesus are co-heirs with Christ and inheritors of the kingdom. When Jesus says these words we think of how he has said, whoever does this for these, the least of my brothers and sisters, they do it to me.

Once again we are back to the words of James' epistle, faith must be lived out in works. I am reminded of the wise 'bee wife' Queenie in 'Larkrise to Candleford' who says, 'It ent only what you believe nor even what you think, it's what you do and say as matters.' She is not so far off.

The reading seems to be in two parts, Jesus tells of his impending death and he says if you want to be great you must learn to serve. But the two are one because Jesus became the willing servant of all, his service, translated into love, was lived out at Calvary. He illustrates the importance of service when at his last meal with the disciples in John's gospel he washes his disciples' feet. It is summed up in this line, 'Hands that flung stars into space to cruel nails surrendered.'

The worldly values of status and ambition have no place in God's new order; Jesus 'humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.' This is a lesson the disciples still have to learn.

Our aim must be to care about others' feelings, to serve them and not to show selfishness and self-centeredness. The path to true greatness is humbleness and love. God was born in a stable.

In the reading from James we see him condemning destructive worldly values and showing where they can lead. It's tempting to think that James' original audience must have been a sinful lot, but just stop and think of the world news, and then think of how much of the trouble in the world is caused by greed and a lust for power.

James is talking about individual behaviour, earlier he had condemned cruel speech that comes from a callous heart. The tongue only says what the brain tells it to. We must be in control of it. Now he turns his attention to the results of 'bitter envy and ambition.' Unbridled ambition of course links back to the disciples unthinking behaviour in desiring status. Actually they don't realise that they are important in that they will be the foundation of the Christian church, that they will have their place in Jesus' heavenly kingdom as will all who believe and trust in him and try to live his teachings in their lives. They haven't realised yet how different the kingdom values are. James makes just this point in his opening sentence.

'Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.'

The wisdom that is important is the wisdom of Jesus Christ and the fruits of that are a good life. Sadly, says James, so many choose behaviour which is the antithesis of this,

'For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.'

There is nothing wrong with ambition, in itself it is a good servant but it is a bad master, if ambition or envy or bitterness get a hold of a person the result is that destructive forces are unleashed. They are as destructive to the individual as to the victim of them. The next passage sounds so familiar,

‘But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.’

We think of course of the fruits of the spirit, and Paul’s words, ‘By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.’ These are the values that Jesus taught, these are kingdom values that we should all aspire to. This ‘wisdom’ is of God. James knows what upholds a community and what can destroy it, a house divided against itself falls. Obviously he is writing in response to specific behaviour which he is condemning.

‘Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.’

Conflicts, even petty ones, can escalate and often lead to destruction, on a large or small scale. It is peace that we should aim for. That does not mean we shy away from standing up against what is wrong or collude with things for ‘peace’s sake’. Jesus fought a battle against evil. But petty quarrels or ambition born of a desire for one’s own way or power, are condemned by James and of course by Jesus. All of this is contrary to Jesus’ command to serve, to love one another, to put another’s needs before one’s own.

‘You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.’

These values are the world’s values, they are opposed to Jesus’ teaching.

⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.’

This really is summed up in the words ‘Turn from sin and turn to Christ.’ Our pattern is Jesus. Jesus is one with God yet he knelt down to do the most menial act of service for his disciples, including Judas, when he washed their feet. He instructs his followers to do the same. We think of part of the Eucharistic prayer, ‘he opened wide his arms for us on the cross.’ He did so in love as a mother or father opens their arms in love to their child.’ We are called to turn our backs on selfishness and learn Jesus’ way of caring and service. That is not easy; people of the former sort who are motivated by selfish ambition and spite are all too willing to see people who refuse to act in that way as a soft target. Actually it is tough to act as Jesus taught; it’s a lifetime’s work. But we know that God is with us and we turn to him in prayer. How wonderful to know that God loves us, strengthens us and cares for us even when we make mistakes. We remember the prayer that says, ‘whose service is perfect freedom’ we are called not only to serve others but to serve our God.

This Sunday is a red letter day in that dear Spital Chapel is reopened for public worship. I have been privileged in caring for it throughout the pandemic and in keeping prayer going there. Worship is like the heartbeat of God. Throughout its early history Spital was used as a place of rest and care for all who came seeking help. I thank God that his praises can be conducted publicly there once more.

‘Hands that flung stars into space to cruel nails surrendered, this is our God the servant king he calls us now to follow him.’ Graham Kendrick.

~~~~~