

Sermon preached at Scots

18 October 2015

Mark 10 : 35–45

“...and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

How do I end the proclamation of the Gospel usually? That's right I use the words “The Word of Jesus is among us. Hear this Word.” I've been thinking about this and wondering what your take on it is. You see it's not about being taught anything like in the recent TV game show hosted by Jackie Brown about Words where she would find interesting facts in the “I didn't know that sort of category.” Interesting yes, but do I need to do anything with them? Probably not.

What are the words that the gospel writers have Jesus saying really for? Are they just interesting things for us to think about briefly and then carry on doing what we have always done? Because if that's what we think then perhaps it is just time to shut up shop and be nice people.

It is a reading like today's that puts things back in perspective for me again. While James and John dream big dreams, Jesus calls them to a different kind of reality, and Mark in telling this story to his readers is clear that this is the model Jesus is inviting his followers to take up. We've already had the controversies with the Pharisees who use religious observance to tie everyone up in knots, now here Jesus says, don't be like the gentiles either. So who are we to be like?

But the story begins before that. Mark begins his gospel with the words “This is the Good News about Jesus Christ - the Son of God”. Then on comes John the Baptist who proclaims that the one who is coming after him is much greater than he is - in fact - so much greater that John the Baptist declares that he is not good enough even to untie the sandals of this one who is coming. After his baptism Jesus goes out into the wilderness where we read “that angels serve him.”

This story begins to disclose someone special - someone greater even than angels or John the Baptist - himself a special person in his own right. Mark builds a picture of Jesus - using carefully chosen images so that Jesus emerges as someone with a special kind of authority. He challenges the legalistic teaching of the religious leaders of his day - right there on their home ground - the synagogue. He heals people and even raises some - like the daughter of Jairus - from the dead. He tells us that his life will nourish and sustain our spiritual life and growth as surely as bread does the same for our physical growth. He gives direction, and speaks with such power and authority that even the wind and the waves obey him. So, the picture steadily builds up till Peter exclaims in awe, as he finally identifies this figure before him - “You are the Messiah - the anointed one of God”. Yet because we know the story so well, we lose much of the effect of that stunning announcement and the significance it would have had for the disciples. And yet even the disciples don't quite get it. It is not some more information about Jesus they have been granted. It is a call to action, to following.

Some streams of Jewish piety included within it a striving for greatness so that it would only be natural for the disciples to conclude that they had 'made' it - that they were members of the 'top' team as it were, people of some considerable, if not superior, importance. If their leader was truly the Messiah - surely some of his greatness would have to rub off on them. If we had been in their place - would we have thought any differently? I think not. But greatness can still be equated with the kind of power that controls and manipulates.

A colleague teaching Scripture at a local Boys high School in Sydney told how one week there had been much discussion on television and radio about one of Australia's better known financial entrepreneurs whose means of amassing his millions was coming under close scrutiny. This was because of his use of tax havens to lessen dramatically the amount of tax he should be paying. The class was made up

of intelligent 15 year old boys who saw nothing wrong at all with this tax-dodging. In fact the entrepreneur's 'greatness' grew in their eyes because of such strategies. She used today's gospel reading to try to get them to understand what Jesus was saying about greatness - that it was in fact, opposite to that which was being modelled for them by this particular tax-dodger and which they so admired. These boys could not, or were unwilling to grasp Jesus' definition of greatness, in fact they ridiculed it in no uncertain terms.

Unfortunately their views are all too common. We see them being played out in the media night after night and not just from overseas sources. We're good at doing this ourselves.

Jesus is saying that authentic greatness is revealed in servanthood. He highlights how his rule is the opposite of earthly rule. The order of the day for the followers of Jesus is to be the ministry of love and service. God's way is shown as contrary to human thinking.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta who gave her life to the destitute and derelict of India, was once asked "How do you measure your success?" The saintly aged woman looked puzzled for a while and then responded. "I don't remember that the Lord ever spoke of success. He spoke only of faithfulness in loving and serving others. The Lord has called me to that faithfulness. This is the only success that really counts."

We know in our hearts that she is right, but it's not easy. That's why we need readings such as the one from Mark to remind us of what greatness is in God's eyes. For in God's eyes, greatness means putting the needs of others - even those who do not live according to God's way - before any of one's own needs.

The last verse of our gospel reading says "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. With these words Jesus affirms that like the prophesied servant, he will put the needs of others before any of his own needs.

Is it at this point that the world has gone astray - that we go astray? Instead of asking - how can I best meet the needs of the other person? Do we ask how can my needs best be served?

Think how community attitudes would be different if the first question in everyone's minds in whatever situation was 'How can I best serve your needs?' Maybe we would see some trust being injected into relationships at every level. At every level of social, political, industrial, family, intergenerational, religious life - we need to place that question squarely before God 'How can I best serve your needs, Lord?'

It is as we hear these questions addressed to us personally that we can perhaps begin to grasp the whole picture which Mark has constructed for us, and to hear Jesus' words about greatness speak to us anew. Jesus' words not only have to be heard by us, but have to be lived out in our lives. Jesus calls us to a new understanding of the people who make up the "they", the "other" of any situation and challenges us to ask them "How can we best serve your needs?"

As we reflect on the service of our volunteers in the Op Shop, we acknowledge the needs that have been served over the years, those who have access to good clothing, the fellowship and support offered to customers. A work of service indeed by all.

The picture of Jesus is complete with his words about serving others. How about us - what picture do we present to others? One recognisable as resembling the image of Jesus when we seek to meet not our needs alone - but the needs of others - and discover that they might just be God's needs.

So, the Word of Jesus is among us. Hear that Word.