

Church of St Edward the Confessor, Lugano

A Sermon preached by Bishop Michael Langrish on 19 Sept 2021 - Trinity 16



Who Is the Greatest? Following Jesus or lagging behind?

Week by week we listen to a portion of one of the Gospels. But why? Why were the Gospels written in the first place? Quite simply, for the good of the church. And in fact, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as they wrote their Gospels each had in mind a very **particular** church, or group of churches, each in its own way trying to be faithful to the call to be the Body of Christ. In order to be the Body of Christ they had to be, day by day, **in** Christ, as they were baptised to be. In order to live in Christ, they had to know Christ and learn of Him.

Mark's Gospel, which we are reading through at present, was probably written for a community of Gentile (i.e. non- Jewish) Christians, in Rome (just a few hours away from here) during the Jewish War of 66-70. At the risk of over simplifying, I would suggest that its two great themes are **service** and **failure**. Again and again, in this gospel, Jesus teaches the Twelve that greatness consists in service to others, rather than in the exercise of power and authority.

So, the Gospels: the stories of Christ recorded for the benefit of the followers of Christ to be faithful to Him as disciples, and as a church, in the particular circumstances of their own day – a generation on, and then generations on after that as well.

Which means, of course, that the stories we hear week by week in the reading of the Gospel are not just about what happened **then**; but also, about what is happening **now**. They are about we disciples – you and me; and this church – today.

So, what are we to make of this Sunday's Gospel reading, which picks up from last week and that radical day by day, question of Jesus to us all: “Who do **you** say that I am?”

Jesus and the disciples are on a journey. That's another point that Mark's Gospel makes time after time. Journeys are important; things happen on journeys – new things are revealed or discovered; and these things bring change. In this way a journey becomes more than just moving physically from one place to another. It is, more importantly, about moving on in life and faith, in discipleship and character too. It's a journey of spiritual growth.

And that, of course, is precisely a journey that, in a sense, we are called to make, with the Lord, Sunday by Sunday. Through the liturgical year, we are taken on a journey - following Jesus from cradle to cross to the crown of glory, tracking **his** journey and making it our own so that, in St Luke's words '*all that Jesus began to do and teach*' can be continued in us.

So, in today's Gospel, Jesus has gathered up his disciples and is leading them along the road to Jerusalem. Again, perhaps that is another picture for us as a church. Every time we meet, we might picture ourselves as a group of disciples, gathered together around our teacher and shepherd, and wanting to learn. And note that in the bit of the journey we heard about this morning, it is as if Jesus is speaking with his disciples (including us) as they walk together, not just as a teacher but even more as a friend. Jesus, even as our Lord and Saviour, is not some distant, self-contained figure, remote from human comfort or grief. As one who shares our humanity to the full, he, like us, needs to share, needs to confide in friends, those whom he ought to be able to trust - sharing his most secret thoughts, the things that pain his heart. How often do we gather in Holy Communion like this expecting not just to share our pains and griefs, our hopes and sorrows with him; but expecting to hear him sharing his pains and sorrows, his griefs and expectations, all that is on his heart as he surveys his world, his church today, with **us?**

Jesus' heart is heavy. At any moment, he tells them, the Son of Man is going to be betrayed. Do they listen? Do they know what to be looking out for? Do we? This is the second time Jesus has spoken to the disciples about this, about the pain and suffering he can foresee. When he told them of it the first time, they couldn't understand. They were in denial, and it ended with Jesus bitterly rebuking Peter for trying to turn him away from the path to the cross.

The fact that Jesus so quickly feels the need to confide in them a second time, tells us much about how the thought must have been pressing down on him – a sense of that agony that he would feel so deeply in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he would sweat blood at the thought of what faithful obedience to the Father, and genuine love for a sick world can involve. But still the disciples don't get it. It all seems to just go over their heads. How often, I have to ask myself, does that happen with me? Here I am part of the body of Christ, one of its members, and still I don't get what the head and the heart of the body, Jesus, is really saying to me.

So often we allow Jesus, for all his gentle patience, to get ahead of us and we lag behind. That seems to have happened here as Jesus arrived at the house in Capernaum, ahead of the rest of the group. And, on this occasion, it quickly becomes obvious what had caused them to lag behind. They had been talking among themselves, and clearly about something they hadn't wanted him to overhear, presumably because had he done so they would, and should, have felt deeply ashamed.

Despite what he had just shared with them, out of the depths of his heart, **they** were having an argument - about status and power. Left to themselves they had begun bickering, yet again, about who was the greatest – who in Jesus absence should be the one to be in charge?

So, *'What were you arguing about on the way?'* Jesus asked them *'But they were silent'* we are told. No surprise there, really, is there? It was the silence of shame. How sad . . .and yet. Shame whilst sad, does not have to be bad. After all, to feel shame is at least to recognise that something is wrong; and when there does come that recognition, and the realisation that you then need to do something about, what we then have is good shame and possibly the energy to begin to try to get things right. What is more worrying is when there are power games being played, and positions being wrestled for, and selfish ambition being allowed to come to the fore, in the church as well as in the world, and the people involved are blissfully ignorant of what is going on, or if they are aware, do not feel ashamed at all, let alone feel any responsibility to do anything different.

Real shame, good shame, may be welcomed as a first step towards conversion. In fact, at the heart of really good, holy, shame, is an awareness of how far someone has drifted away from Jesus, and what is on his heart. As with the disciples on the road, we begin to see how we have allowed a distance to open up between us and him. When we do recognise that this is what is happening, it is then that we are able to see his face gently turning back towards us, not just in judgement or rebuke, but with both a probing questioning and also a healing forgiveness that enables the distance to be closed and for us to take our place at his side, where we belong.

Facing the sin and shame in human life and Christian discipleship is such an important part of our journeying on. It's when we do not feel ashamed for our sin, or when we play make-believe with ourselves, or try in various ways to soften the blow of our failures, and the effect of this on our consciences, that we need to be really worried; or more exactly when we need others to prompt us to this, and to see things as they really are. That too is one of the roles of the church, to help us to see with greater reality the truth of who and what we are. It is why, when we gather in Communion, one of the first things we are invited to do is to examine ourselves before our Lord, and then to confess to him our sins of omission and commission, of

thought word and deed, and then to receive his forgiveness and the grace to go into deeper Communion, at one with Him.

That is why we also pray for the grace to this with honest and humble hearts: *Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may love you completely, and rightly magnify your holy name;*

For if we do not say this with sincerity and conviction, if our words of confession are just going through the motions, we then exclude ourselves from receiving the mercy and forgiveness that all of us need. How deeply tragic our lives would be if we had no one like Jesus to look deeply into our hearts, and ask us, as he did with those disciples back then: *“What’s really been going on? What has really been preoccupying you? What have you been arguing about, and what are you going to do about it now?”* Each day is meant to a day of journeying, a day of learning what is on the Lord’s heart for us, a day of forgiveness, having our feet put right again for the road still ahead.

So it was back then. Jesus sat down, called the 12 to him, and began to explain the gospel to them once again, and once more to correct and reshape, to expose and redirect to their misguided thoughts and actions, their ill-conceived values, aspirations and ideas. – as he does with us, in each Eucharist through the ministry of the word.

Looking on that little group of disciples Jesus began to once more attempt to completely overturn their muddled and worldly ideas about status, position and power. *“Whoever wants to be first must be the last of all and servant of all”* he said. It’s a hard lesson to learn. This whole issue clearly continued to be a problem in the early church, as it is in the church now, for we find Paul and James and John, in their epistles, bringing their readers back to the same theme.

And just one further thing to note here is that Jesus doesn’t seem to contest the disciples desire to be great - as such. What he does do is to overturn completely the underlying conception of what true greatness, real leadership, really means.

In the eyes of Christ, true greatness, real leadership, the proper use of power, is **always** about what is best for the body as a whole, rather than for just one or a few members of it. Our motives in seeking position or influence are things to which we need to be constantly alert, and ready to examine all the time. We need to be so aware of when the pressure to seek or use power or position for the wrong reason is present, whether that pressure comes from us or elsewhere. I have been privileged to minister in three continents and have seen how the desire to be ‘big boss’ is prevalent in all cultures, yet the pressures leading to it come in a variety of

different ways. In the materialist, secular culture of Europe the impetus often comes from a desire for personal wealth and power. In Africa and the South Pacific, I saw how the 'big man (or woman) syndrome' come so often from demands within family, tribe or clan – the demand that someone who has reached the top should use that position for their- rather than the wider national – good.

But whatever the culture in which we find ourselves, Jesus teaches, the culture of the Kingdom of God is radically different in its approach to how we see and use leadership, status and power, than it is in the councils of the world. In the kingdom of God, and the Church of God, the one who is first is the one who **serves**, not the one who **commands**.

And, so that the disciples would better understand, Jesus takes a small child embraces them and puts them centre stage. In such a one as this, he says to them, and to you and me, is the focus of where true leadership, and the right use of all power, should always be found – in an unswerving attentiveness to the most weak, the most vulnerable, the most needy and to lifting them up, rather than in any self-elevating, or self-promotion by those who are already strong.

And when you do have a focus like that – both as individual disciples and together as a church, then, in using whatever power, or influence, or position or wealth, or status or leadership you have to further the interests of the weaker, the poor, the sick, any of those who society marginalises or discards, is serving me, says Jesus. Whoever pushes such as these away, or uses them for their own ends, is pushing away and rejecting me, he insists. But whoever uses what they have to welcome such as that child in his name welcomes Jesus, and both Jesus and the Father then welcomes them, us, into the fellowship of the Kingdom of God.

Mark 9.30-37

³⁰ They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, '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.' ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³ Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' ³⁶Then 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.'