

Preaching Mark 9: 33-37

A Sermon for Christ Church and Good Shepherd 14.06.20

John, a man I got to know well 20 to 30 years ago and who made a huge impression on me, was one of the wisest people I have known. In the world's eyes he was a nobody; by the world's standards he wasn't clever or successful and was often overlooked. In the church he never wanted to be in the limelight. In fact, he was a very quiet man.

John was often ignored, yet he was helpful in hidden ways: quietly caring, he could defuse difficult situations and was a natural peacemaker, and had a healing effect in church. He was a man who thought deeply and had great humility which I felt came from his real and living spirituality. In biblical terms John was a true disciple.

In this morning's story from Mark's Gospel Jesus is moving from Galilee and turning his face towards Jerusalem, the Cross and the empty tomb. 'Who do you think you are?' and 'what do you think you are?' begins to matter more and more. Against the determination of Jesus to offer salvation to the world through his death and resurrection, is set the bickering of the disciples about who amongst them is the most important – who is the greatest?

Jesus doesn't confront them on the road but waits instead until they reach their favourite place of retreat at Capernaum. There he shepherds them to a point of silence, listening and above all of looking. He sits his closest followers down, and might as well have said, as one commentator puts it: 'Right, we stop here and we talk things out and we get things straight. In this new community, (which we call the church), the first shall be last and servant of all. Following me is not some sort of power game, he says, don't expect to get glory and greatness by it.

'Don't you understand what I am about? Open your eyes and see! Look at me! This is who I am. And just to make sure you understand, here is a picture you will never forget.'

He *took a child*, set *her* in the midst of all those grown men. Put his arm round her and said, 'Whoever welcomes in my name one of the children, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes also the one who sent me.' A *child* in first-century Mediterranean society was regarded as a non-person, the lowest of the low, on a par only with slaves and servants.

Who and what is of ultimate value in the Kingdom? A child, the last, the least, with no status and no apparent value, yet in the eyes of God, *a child* was of the greatest value. '**NOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND**'? he asks them. '**NOW** do you begin to see what I'm about? Start to recognise me in what is most insignificant, most overlooked in the world around you, and *then* you'll be getting somewhere.

'This child is a symbol of my position in the world – and yours too, if you choose to keep following me. My path doesn't lead to a crown and kingship but to cruelty and killing. There's no glory in it other than the glory of service and servanthood.'

If we are to reckon what our value to God is in God's Kingdom, it will be reckoned by our service, our kindliness and compassion, our humility, our ability to put others before ourselves, and our willingness to engage in the upside-down values of the Kingdom of God, where those of greatest value are the ones who give the most of themselves in the service of others.

In our world today it can often appear that *time is money*, where we *judge* someone's values by *what they wear*, where they went to *school or university*, the *car* they drive, their *post-code*, the *job* they have. How often is the *real value*, the *real worth* of each individual we meet valued by the amount of monetary possessions or power they possess and not the *quality of their soul* or the way they can *come* alongside another to *empathise* and *care for them*?

What is of value to the world, what is of importance doesn't really equate too much in the Kingdom of God. It's not that the things of the world don't matter or have no worth, *if shared generously*, it is that our *value, real value*, comes from how we behave towards one another, and how we set our priorities for living. In a sense none of this is rocket science; we all know it when we see it in others; we also know that it's perfectly possible for us to achieve. The question remains – do we choose this lifestyle?

Do we make those Kingdom decisions about how we shape our thoughts, words and actions?

- In the world of politics, do those who let it be known that they hold Christian values practise these lifestyle choices, which reveal their real selves?
- In the world of the Church, do our Church leaders practise these lifestyle choices?
- Or in the world of education, business, social services, the arts, or retail?

The beauty of Jesus bringing the *child into the midst* of his disciples is not simply the lesson for us to be childlike in our response to him, but also to challenge us to think about what we teach our children *at home, church or school* that builds up their lives, and exposes them to the *mysteries, wonders, questions and challenges* of a lived-out faith today.

Our value, real value to God, is not measured by wealth or power but by courage, wisdom, compassion, generosity, kindness, encouragement. The person quietly visiting someone who has no relatives or friends and would go from one week to the next without seeing a friendly face. The person buying extra when out shopping so that a foodbank might have a bit more to share. The person making a donation towards a charity that doesn't attract big money or publicity but whose work changes lives. The person who notices someone struggling at work, or at life, and takes time to get alongside and help. The person who gives a coat. The person who shares a meal or gives a drink. The person who visits in hospital or prison.

As we do it to the least, we do it to Jesus. As we give of ourselves, so the extent of our value in God's Kingdom is realised.