

## Sermon for Trinity 16 – 19<sup>th</sup> September – Jane Brough

Do you sometimes think that you're just not up to scratch as a Christian? Perhaps you feel that you don't properly understand what you're meant to believe and you're afraid or embarrassed to admit it. Maybe you're also aware of a depressing lack of progress in the Christian life; you fail in the same ways again and again. In fact, most of us probably feel like this much of the time. We can take heart, however, because in Mark's Gospel the disciples are slow learners, quarrelsome and self-important, repeatedly making the same mistakes. They are no better than us, but Jesus doesn't give up on them.

Aware of the conflict surrounding him and the pressure upon him, Jesus often sought space for himself and disciples. He also needed the opportunity to teach them, so as we see in today's Gospel as he passed through Galilee, "he did not want anyone to know it". This is the second of three attempts he makes to explain that ahead of him lie rejection, suffering and death. But this is the way Jesus must go and God will vindicate him by raising him from the dead.

The attempt fails, however, leaving the disciples confused and afraid. Who can blame them? Jesus is the anointed one. They have seen his power to heal and the authority of his words, recently some of them saw God's glory pouring out of Jesus on the mount of transfiguration. If God is so obviously present and active in him, surely Jesus will triumph over all opposition?

This talk of suffering and death makes no sense and it was Peter who, on an earlier occasion, took Jesus to one side and urged him not to speak so negatively (Mark 8: 31-33) Peter here is typical of all the disciples, who cannot yet grasp, the logic of God being "in Christ reconciling the World to himself". This is costly love, requiring the pouring out of divine life in self-sacrifice.

The disciples don't yet understand that the true greatness of God is revealed in Jesus, the suffering servant. They also have yet to understand how radically this redefines human greatness. How frustrating it must be for Jesus that the disciples bicker self-importantly on the way about which of them is the greatest. Did what he taught them make no impact? How can he get through to them?

Jesus tries again. First, he uses words, the paradoxical truth – which he is living out and which the disciples too must grasp – that to be first you must be last, to be great you must forget greatness and become nothing. Then, to illustrate how to put this teaching into practice, he offers a visual aid, a child. The point about children, in Jesus' world, was that they were nonentities, lacking status and rights, scarcely showing up on an adult's radar of what matters. So, when Jesus takes this child in his arms, the disciples are not likely to have thought, "how sweet!" but "how inappropriate." Jesus is in fact demonstrating what it might mean to become "last" by embracing those are "least".

Have they got it this time? Doubtless they nod contritely, but no, they haven't got it, because before long the disciples will again be clashing over status (10:35-45) and they will also fail dismally at their next opportunity to welcome children and so welcome Jesus (10: 13-16).

St Augustine uses a nice image to convey the challenge posed to us by today's Gospel. "Observe a tree, how it first tends downwards, that it may then shoot forth upwards. It fastens its roots low in the ground, that it may send forth its top towards heaven". The trouble is that while the sending down of roots is automatic for trees, it does not come naturally to us human beings to bury our lives in the rich soil of self-forgetful humility. We are hardwired, it seems, to grasp whatever we can for ourselves. How else will we get a life?

But Jesus calls us to another way of life, the life he lived. He constantly reminds us of the gloriously counter-intuitive truth that only by losing our lives will we find them. And if we wonder what this will actually mean, and how we can begin to follow this way, we need not worry, because opportunities will come to us today, tomorrow, every day. Opportunities to welcome those "least" in our world, opportunities to opt out of the mad struggles for status which suck us in. We will of course fail these tests repeatedly, but Jesus does not give up on us because he wants us to share his life, totally, and in the end we will.

Amen.