

Sermon by Rev Carol Harley for Sunday 19.09.21: Mark 9:30-37

'I'm the best – pick me!' 'No you're not, I can do it better than you!' 'Miss – Miss – choose me', comes another petulant voice. Then a young boy's voice bellows out to his teacher from the back of the classroom, 'Both of the girls are rubbish, Miss! I ought to have the most important part in the concert – all girls are rubbish anyway!!'

Well I expect most of us can remember this sort of bickering between children for the most powerful role in the group whether it's at school, amongst family members, cubs, guides This vying amongst them to be chosen for the top honour is such a childish thing to do, but adults do it too. Many of us want to have the most money, the top job, the greatest power or status and we will go to any lengths to achieve our goal even if it means trampling on other peoples' toes in order to do so.

This sort of ambition is rearing its ugly head among the Christian communities to which James is writing in our Epistle this morning, leading to quarrels and fighting, and we meet it again among the Twelve as they journey to Capernaum.

The topic of 'power' has been on their minds recently. They have been confused and upset at Jesus' talk about him being handed over 'into the power of men' to face death. They begin to bicker about which one of them has the most prominent place in their group. Who is the most competent or the most faithful? Who is the Teacher's pet? Who is the greatest?

Jesus doesn't confront them on the road but waits instead until they have reached their favourite place of retreat at Capernaum. There he shepherds them to a place of silence, of listening and above all of looking. Teaching with words has previously been unsuccessful. Now is the time for symbol, sign and sacrament.

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 you are about to take on will make the powerful people hate you and hunt you down because of me. Open your eyes and see! Look at me! This is who I am and then into the middle of them he places a child, symbol of utter powerlessness in the world's eyes. In Mediterranean society a child was a nobody, they had no legal rights and were totally dependant on others for nurture and protection. He or she was the lowest of the low, on a par only with slaves and servants.

What Jesus does by bringing a child into the centre of things is to make the reality of a child the reality of discipleship. If you want to be a disciple, he implies, you must become like a child. Not childish, but child-like.

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. Because my pathway 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.

'Whoever sees me in this child, whoever welcomes me in the lowest of the low, welcomes not me but the One who sent me', says Jesus in his attempt to teach his disciples where they will find the people who need God's love. These are to be amongst the outcast, those on the margins, those who have no power of their own.

The fascination with self-interest and self-absorption and 'my needs first' hasn't changed much down the centuries! In a world gripped with 'me first', in a world that always looks for the next opportunity for advancement or to get one over a colleague, Jesus says – if you really want to be a disciple, one of my followers, become like children. Be vulnerable and trusting, be hopeful and take in all that's going on around you.

Jesus also challenges his followers, then and now, to be servants. In this upside-down kingdom he preaches about, where children are honoured and central, the truly faithful and truly powerful must be servants. Jesus measures greatness not by success but by service.

As we think about our faith, and what it means to live it and experience it, where is the child in the midst? What for us have been the lessons learned years ago that still, rightly or wrongly, shape what we believe and how we behave? What were the foundational stones of faith that were laid down for us by those who shared what they believed with us? What are the gifts that we are already passing on to the generations coming after us? What are the childish things that we must no longer do?

The beauty of Jesus bringing the child into the middle of them is not just 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.

We are also challenged to think seriously about the question of servanthood. How easily do we show solidarity with those who count for nothing? Do we make time to go outside our circle of friends to serve others, because our world badly needs others to show them kindness and compassion?

Within our lives of faith, we remain God's child, and that counts for something more than words can easily say. We give thanks for the love and good examples of Christ-likeness shown to us in our own childhood and try to pass on that example in our own way and words to all God's children today.