

## Back to Church Sunday, 13<sup>th</sup> September, 2009

### Mark 9: 33-37

#### Come As We Are

“...for on the way they had argued about who was greatest.”

One of the most painful experiences of my life – and I’ve had a few – was my move from Sydney to Melbourne, to be ordained here. Quite simply, I left everything behind. It wasn’t just the leaving of family, friends, home, job, financial security and all of that; it was far more. I knew hardly anyone in Melbourne ; no-one here knew anything about me; so who I was and what I’d been in Sydney was of no consequence. In effect, I was stripped of all the markers which had given me my identity in my life in Sydney. Gone was my status and professional standing, gone were my church and career networks, gone were my everyday relationships and roles. I honestly felt like a nobody; invisible, emptied-out, and an alien in a strange land (besides the identity crisis - trams on the road? And as for football!!). I struggled with where and how I fitted in this new life; I had to rediscover who I was without all of those things that had defined my being. That’s hard –and I know many of you have had that thrust upon you in the face of loss. For me, too, because I had been an achiever, it was hard not to be recognised, hard to be starting from scratch, and hard not to try to prove or assert prove my worth.

And this is where we find the disciples in our Gospel reading today, disregarding Jesus’ teaching and reverting to the ways of their culture, where one’s status was paramount. They’re arguing about who is the greatest amongst them –who has the most honour, who pulls top rank. Pretty standard human nature, isn’t it? The desire for recognition, for some sort of prominence. Not much has changed over the centuries. But deeper down, this is about the fundamental human need to be valued; we want to feel that our life has some significance. Many of us know that lying inner voice that whispers to us: “you’re not good enough; you’re not acceptable. You’re a nothing, a nobody; you don’t fit in. You’re a failure”. So we can be pretty susceptible to things that make us feel important.

Jesus has been telling his disciples that he’s going to be betrayed and killed. And they don’t want to hear it. “No way , Jesus, that’s not going to happen. You’ve got too much power. You’re the winner round here”. They want to hold onto their hopes and dreams that this Jesus would be the conquering Messiah king who defeats the Roman oppressors and sets the Hebrew people free. Their minds are on power; they’ve been on a winning streak with Jesus, they’re loving being at the centre of attention as Jesus-the-miracle-worker’s special friends. So now they’re jockeying for their own elevated position and honour. That’s hardly surprising – after all, this was a society quite seriously organised and oriented around status, and social hierarchy.

Jesus confronts them about their argument and turns the whole notion of power and greatness on its head: if you want to be great, you must be a servant of all. Greatness is not about winning, not about being the best, or being first. But are the disciples going to hear this? Their silence indicates they know they’re on the

wrong track. They've experienced the way Jesus has challenged the religious authorities, and they've heard his message of love and peace and justice time and again, but it seems they're still so enmeshed in their culture's systems of status and pecking orders that they don't really get just how radical Jesus is and what he is asking of them. And so, to really emphasise his point, Jesus wraps a little child in his arms, and tells his disciples that greatness is linked to being able to welcome and receive such a child. To do *this*, he stresses, is to receive himself and the one who sent him.

Now, in our Western culture there's nothing striking about Jesus' actions. Children are welcomed. But for the disciples, there is scandal and impact in this: you see, in Jesus' times children were considered little more than property, lower than women and on a par with slaves. Adults didn't acknowledge them. Children were rendered as socially invisible; non-persons, nobodies. For a great teacher like Jesus to elevate a child's status in this way just wasn't done; it broke the boundaries of acceptability, and radically overturned the right social order.

But this *can* be just as subversive for us in our status and success-obsessed society today as it was then. For starters, there's a call to us here about the inherent worth and dignity of all people. In that, there's clearly the challenge of confronting ourselves with how we treat our society's nobodies, the marginalised, the people we don't like to acknowledge.

But digging deeper, underneath this, what we hear from Jesus, is a challenge to how we construct our self worth and bolster our needs for significance. What do we value? What are our "if only's"? What are the things we believe will make life right for us?

These days we're in a world that puts increasing pressure on us to *Be Someone*, to be worthwhile, be noticed. And a large part of the world tells us that our significance and value is to be found in our possessions and achievements and our appearance. The seduction is to believe that in being first or best, we are therefore the most important ....that in *doing* something *better*, it means we're a better person than the other, and that we're worth something.

In our time and culture, we're still caught up with the same question as Jesus' disciples: who is the greatest? And we've heard how Jesus answers this. And his answer still applies, across centuries and cultures. He turns it all upside down: there is no greatest and no least. The Apostle Paul, as we heard earlier, puts that another way: he tells us more than once, that in Christ there is no carving up of God's favour : it makes no difference at all whether we're from this ethnic group or that, whether we're religious or irreligious; insider or outsider, rich or poor, male or female, and also, as the church now acknowledges, no difference whether we're gay or straight. In Christ's living and dying for us all, every possible distinction among us is rendered irrelevant.

And Paul is just pointing to what Jesus has done in exposing this self-delusion that our identity and our worth is tied to what we do, where we're from and what we have. Jesus brings us back to **who** we really are, loosing us from society's dictates about who's acceptable and who's not. And who are we? We're

people made in God's image, loved by him, to the extent that he gave Jesus to us, to show us the way back to himself, to empower us by his Spirit to turn our lives around and give us new life. And God longs for us to turn to him and take hold of that and be in relationship with him. There's no entry requirements of perfection or greatness –just an openness to come; to come as we are and to follow him.

Where are you with all of this? I started with that story about myself – the painful stripping back of the things that had bolstered my identity. But in that complete stripping back, that emptying out, there was new life and a reshaped identity. And there was the joy and the wonderful liberating affirmation that came with that. Of course God's love isn't tied to the things that our world values. Of course we don't have to prove ourselves to him to be loved and accepted. He loves us and values us, and welcomes us just as we are. And hear that for yourselves: he loves and values each one of you no matter who you are, what burdens or shame you may carry in secret, no matter of how society labels you. No distinctions; no favouritisms; no need to seek what the world gives applause for.

We're all significant to God, and we each have a part to play in God's purpose of good for all creation.

His invitation is simple: Come. Come as you are and allow yourself to be embraced by God. Will you do that?