

Contexts

Mark's Gospel

- Composed between 65-70 CE
- Generally accepted as the first Gospel written.
- Authorship is unclear but possibly written by John Mark, the companion of Peter in Rome.
- Begins with the ministry of John the Baptist in the wilderness, then the Baptism of Jesus, then Jesus battling the forces of evil in the wilderness.
- First action of Jesus is to establish a community to establish the kingdom of God.
- Major work of this community is the work of healing and restoring God's right order, as opposed to the order of Rome, or the order established by the scribes and Pharisees, or religious and cultural norms of the time.
- Cleansing & healing stories restore people to their proper (rightful) place in the Kingdom and in human society (no longer outcasts, despised, unclean, etc).
- The right order of God's kingdom shatters and goes beyond the human and religious limitations placed on some of God's beloved sons and daughters.
- There is a characteristic starkness in Mark's Gospel – it is the shortest of the 4 canonical Gospels.
- Often the story is told by contrast – who is truly blind: the blind beggar or the seeing disciples, etc.

Mark 9:30-37 – things to notice

- We skip forward another chapter from last Sunday's Gospel but we are still in this section of Mark in which Jesus instructs the disciples (and will read from it for the next 5 weeks).
- Most of this teaching takes place on a journey from Caesarea Philippi (well north of the Sea of Galilee) to Jerusalem where Jesus will meet his fate.
- After leaving the mountain... - Mark's story of the Transfiguration immediately precedes this Sunday's Gospel.
- Jesus and the disciples are making their way through Galilee (towards Jerusalem) privately – Jesus does not want the townspeople to know because he wants to spend time with the disciples as he instructs them.
- This instruction is (once again) about his destiny to suffer, be put to death and to rise again.
- The disciples do not understand (just like in last week's Gospel) and they are afraid to ask him about it – after Jesus' teaching in last week's Gospel, the story of the Transfiguration and the story of Jesus healing a boy whom the disciples could not heal it seems remarkable that the disciples still do not understand. Mark paints the disciples in a fairly negative light.
- Capernaum & 'the house' - Capernaum, on the north side of the Sea of Galilee is a central place in Jesus' Galilean ministry. Jesus clearly has a base there since there are multiple references to the house at Capernaum in Mark. May or may not be Peter's house.
- Jesus asks the disciples about what they were arguing about on the road – the disciples are too ashamed to answer Jesus.
- Perhaps they *had* understood (to some degree) what Jesus had said about his suffering and death and were arguing over who would succeed him (which of them was the greatest). Their interest is self-centred and self-seeking. In contrast to Jesus, the disciples seem more concerned about positions of glory than doing the will of God. Neither do they seem particularly concerned about Jesus and what will happen to him.

- Note that twice in this passage the disciples are silent – firstly when Jesus predicts his passion and death for the second time, and now when he asks them about their argument.
- Jesus given another teaching: if you want to be considered first make yourself last and servant of all – the idea of leadership as service, not leadership as self-seeking power and glory.
- The example of the little child – the image is not of humility and helplessness, but of someone without legal status and therefore helpless or unable to repay or reward an act of kindness. Jesus calls the disciples to welcome those who cannot repay or reward.
- Whoever welcome one such as these in my name – the disciples call to welcome in the name of Jesus especially the powerless and helpless; welcome is extended not for selfish reward, but as part of being a servant-disciple.

The Liturgical Context

The First Reading comes from the Book of Wisdom continuing the 'suffering servant' theme of last week's first reading. It is about the godless lying in wait for and attacking the virtuous man, torturing him and condemning him to a shameful death.

Reflection

Today's readings continue last Sunday's themes of Jesus as the 'suffering servant' and authentic discipleship. Jesus continues to instruct the disciples that he will suffer and die and rise again, but the disciples seem very slow to understand. Perhaps it is an awful truth they don't want to face. In fact, they don't respond to what Jesus says at all.

They want Jesus to be a 'warrior-king', a liberator who would restore Israel to greatness and crush the Romans. But that is not Jesus' idea. Jesus is always acting as a 'shepherd-king'. He is the servant of the flock, the one who looks after the sheep and cares for them. Jesus' messiahship is one of service, not one of seeking glory.

On the road to Capernaum the disciples are not discussing the important things Jesus has told them about who he is and his destiny, but which of them was the greatest. Using a little child as an example Jesus tells the disciples that real leadership is about service and giving without expecting anything in return. Seeking glory is not the calling of the true disciple. Doing things in order to gain rewards is not the calling of the true disciple. Proclaiming God's love, compassion, care, justice and forgiveness is.

Every Christian is called to this ministry of servant-leadership that is, to be leaders in the doing of service.

Reflection 2

Today's readings continue last Sunday's themes of Jesus as the 'suffering servant' and the nature of authentic discipleship.

On the road through Galilee Jesus continues to instruct the disciples that he will suffer and die and rise again, but the disciples seem very slow to understand and are too afraid to ask him about it. Perhaps it is an awful truth they just don't want to face. Maybe they want Jesus to be a 'warrior-king', a liberator who would restore Israel to greatness and crush the Romans. Perhaps they have begun to think of themselves as princes and rulers in this new Israel.

Among themselves the disciples are not discussing the important things Jesus has told them about who he is and his destiny, but fighting about which of them was the

greatest - who will be first in line to receive honour, power and glory in the kingdom of Jesus.

Using a little child as an example Jesus tells the disciples that real leadership is about service and giving without expecting anything in return.

It's hard for us to grasp the power of what Jesus says and does here. In his time, unlike now, children had no social status or value at all. Until adulthood they were nobodies. To welcome a child would have required a person to put aside all their ideas of self-importance and adult status in order 'to simply meet the child as an equal, as "child" to child.' This is what Jesus is telling the disciples to do. Even more astonishing, Jesus goes on to identify both himself and God with the little child!

This is a direct challenge to the disciples' understanding of Jesus' messiahship and to their notions about God. 'Is God to be thought of as a kind of extraterrestrial Ruler to whom nothing but fear and service is due? Or is the God revealed by Jesus a God whose primary gesture toward human beings is that of One who serves, One who comes among us in the guise of a child?' Jesus' unusual gesture of hugging a child in public expresses powerfully the preciousness of each and every human person in the sight of God, no matter how small, insignificant or young. We, too, are hugged by God in this moment.

Seeking glory is not the calling of the true disciple. Doing things in order to gain rewards is not the calling of the true disciple. Putting aside discrimination, status and power to proclaim God's love, compassion, care, justice and forgiveness is.

Every Christian is called to this ministry of servant-leadership that is, to be leaders in the doing of service.

cf Byrne, Brendan, *A Costly Freedom - A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Sydney, St Paul's, 2008), pp 152-153