

Pentecost 16
20/9/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Proverbs 31:10-31

Psalm 1

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Mark 9:30-37

Arguments on the way

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

Mark 9:33:

Jesus' question to his disciples: 'What were you arguing about on the way?'
But they were silent.

The question is: What sort of silence is this?

It's hardly a profound silence; certainly not a pregnant silence; obviously not a comfortable silence. Rather it is an embarrassed, a suffocating, a guilty silence.

We have all had experience with this sort of silence. But it is nevertheless a silence which, as an act of grace, might yet stop us in our tracks.

For that question of Jesus, now as then, turns out to be the most redemptive question we can possibly be asked if it can silence, even temporarily, our endless internal - if not external - calculations: who is the greatest? This intense longing for recognition, for status, or its shadow side – our crippling sense of inferiority, our perceived insignificance, our manifest unimportance testifies - as does nothing else - to how detached we are from the source of all life. That is to say, Jesus' question uncovers a profound separation from God.

A couple of weeks ago, Michael McGirr - known to some of us - was asked by The Age - in the Finance section of all places- for his personal philosophy. His answer, predictably, was refreshing and to the point. 'Christianity'. Then by way of elucidation: 'Christianity is a freedom story to release us from the tyranny of our own ego'. That is the only proper answer to the question: 'what were you arguing about?'

This question of Jesus, therefore, comes to us with all our superiority and inferiority complexes as the promise of another way – this time not a status either achieved by us, or flunked by us, but a status *conferred* on us: the status of a disciple, where being first and last is redefined by a servant who is Lord, and by a Lord who is a servant.

That is why we are told: 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'

It is significant to note in passing that this injunction really means a redefinition of rank, not its suppression. It is not an endorsement of the sort of conformity that today would have everyone allocated to the level of a common denominator, a social fog in which all cats are grey, where everybody must be the same as everybody else.

That is certainly one way of handling the inevitable fact of rank, but it is surely a far cry from what Jesus has in mind when he says: 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all'.

In this respect, we can appreciate why the question of rank in the sight of God became one of the most important religious questions for the Jews of the day, given the then radical stratification of society with its fixed lines of demarcation between Jew and Gentile, men and women, clean and unclean, righteous and unrighteous.

But then, in addition to all these entrenched divisions, there is a hidden polemic in this passage as well. By stressing Jesus' imperative requiring the reversal of rank, Mark is seeking to make the contrast with false teachers of the day who understood Jesus to be not the One who would 'give his life as a ransom for many', but rather to be a divine miracle worker, seeking to attract personal kudos by enrolling sensation seekers as his followers.

So - crucial implications are at stake here for understanding the distinctive nature of discipleship. If Jesus is understood to be a divine miracle worker, then his disciples could reasonably be encouraged to see themselves as his successors, with all the social recognition and benefits of status now falling their way. The force of the question in this case would indeed then be apposite: Who is the greatest!

But as disciples of a servant messiah whose end as the ultimate last was to be the cross, all this would be taken away. As we see in the passage before us, it took some time for the disciples to register this true state of affairs. Hence: 'What were you arguing about on the way? Finding this whole new world that they were being summoned to too difficult to come to terms with, we ought not to be surprised that they were preoccupied by competing for who could be considered to be the greatest.

The fact is that our text is replete with ironies. This time: the significance of the topography. We are told explicitly that this is happening in Capernaum, on the journey south from Galilee. As early as the first chapter, we have been informed that it is Capernaum which is to be the centre of gravity for the disclosure of Jesus' ministry, the place where Jesus' true Lordship will be relentlessly unfolded to a sick society. It is in Capernaum, we read, that the disciples:

'brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered together, and he healed many who were sick and cast out many demons, and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.'

So the contrast could not be greater between what the disciples had first witnessed after their calling, and now their pathetic display of self-importance. Who indeed are now shown to be the demon possessed? If it is the case that it was in Capernaum that 'he would not permit the demons to speak because they knew him', these so-called disciples, who are supposed really to know him, demonstrate that the demons are well and truly in full voice.

So it is that here, once again in Capernaum, Jesus has to unmask a new demonism - his disciples' true aspirations to power. What's more, not only do they not understand where he is trying to lead them, they are actually headed full speed in the opposite direction. We are intended to be struck by this further irony. As those called to be disciples of the servant Way, they are caught debating who was the greatest amongst them 'on the way'.

And then follows the real object lesson, demonstrating with inescapable clarity what becoming 'least' was to mean. Jesus stands a child in front of them. This is no sentimental gesture, as we might all too easily assume. For the fact is that in the ancient Mediterranean world, the status and rights of children were at the very bottom of the social and economic scale. Without exception, authority ran vertically downwards. Not youth but age and tradition were revered and powerful. (O to be alive in those halcyon days!) By contrast, early training was disciplined and harsh, and it was not until early adulthood that the young person began to receive serious consideration as a member of the family group.

So it is remarkable enough that Jesus should draw attention to children at all. But it would have been found quite shocking that he would advance them as *models* for discipleship. Again, Jesus throws the hearers world into crisis with this radical status reversal of the kingdom.

All this helps to sharpen the question: 'What were you arguing about on the way?'

What is at stake then is this: our way or his way? In our own baptism - our metaphorical Capernaum, as it were - where, like those original disciples, we were first incorporated into the gospel - there our feet were once securely placed to tread his path, not ours. The irony then that it should be once again in Capernaum where the first disciples lost the way, substituting for their 'baptismal' calling their self-absorbed search for identity.

But the gospel is this. That when similarly our baptism is at stake - as it perennially is - we can rejoice that the light shines continually on the true way, constantly renewed as we are in body and soul by this eucharistic food for the journey already begun. This means that we are given courage again and again to embody our true conferred identity, rather than the insecurities of our own constructed world.

Perhaps the best commentary on all this reversal of rank is the practicality of the epistle of James today, where in its own way it holds up to us the same problematic of an 'un-disciplined' life. But what of the daring of the framers of the lectionary in choosing as the Old Testament reading to accompany this gospel and epistle, the Proverbs chapter, over which the NRSV puts as title: 'Ode to a Capable Wife'. It would be a courageous male preacher who today would take on a text like this, and I'm not he! Perhaps only to venture this - that presumably we are being encouraged to see in this ode the reflection of a more faithful rendering of Jesus' admonition to disciples. The fact that, in the gospel reading, this admonition is directed to defaulting male disciples only underlines that contrast.

'What were you arguing about on the way?'

So it is that that Jesus' question is always being put to the obsessions of men and women of every age as it was to those first disciples.

We began with a text about an embarrassed silence. Our custom is to end each Sunday sermon with what we hope might prove to be a different sort of silence. So let each of us ponder anew that radical reversal of the Gospel offered us again this morning. Let us once more lay hold on the gift of that conferred status - offered to us in our baptism, and renewed around this table - a gift that alone has the power to crucify every contemporary manifestation of that insidious demon possession - the tyranny of our own ego.

Otherwise, the only alternative will be that, for yet another week, like those first disciples we will leave - only with our shamefaced silence.
