

Job 38:1-11, 34-41
Psalm 104
Hebrews 5:1-10
Mark 10:35-45

It shall not be so among you – a path is made by walking

Jesus and the disciples were on a journey that for the twelve turned out to be an exercise in learning what it meant to follow Jesus. The sequence begins in Mark with the story of a blind man who finally “saw everything clearly” [8:25] and ends with an account of another blind person who regained his sight and “followed [Jesus] on the way” [10:52]. The two people in these stories are like illuminated markers whose response to Jesus is in stark contrast to the behaviour of the twelve who repeatedly miss the point of what he says and does. Eventually they did learn the meaning of “the way” by walking “the way” with him. But they had to engage with total failure before they fully understood. That is why: *a path is made by walking*.

The story draws us in to identify with the twelve. We become irritated by them, and yet in the end realise that “we” are “them”. The people Mark is having a go at here are the followers, the members of the church, which makes the events of this journey a challenge for faithful people.

The particular issue that comes to light today involves Jesus’ response to James and John’s request for prominent positions in the Kingdom. What is at stake is their understanding of power and leadership that is negative, coercive and dominating. Different from the style promoted by Jesus which is servant leadership that reflects the real understanding of what is expected from the Davidic Messiah.

James and John’s quest for greatness was informed by their every day experience of their Roman overlords. They also knew the kind of sentiments expressed in the Psalms sung in Israel at the enthronement of the King : *The Lord says to my lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool”* [Ps 110:1]. “On the way with Jesus” it looked like there would be a Messianic coup, and they wanted to be the first and second Cabinet Ministers in the new regime, ready to crush their oppressors.

Jesus’ model of leadership and greatness was not based on such structures of authority. He said: *You do not know what you are asking!* And by way of explanation said: *Are you able to drink the cup that I drink and share the Baptism I am Baptized with?* These are key concepts. The cup refers to the destiny that lies ahead of him, that comes from the hand of God. And the Baptism does not mean the sacrament: it stands for undergoing the trials and dangers resulting from Jesus’ entrusting his future entirely to God’s hands, and refusing to seek power and glory for himself. His cup and his Baptism are summed up in his acceptance of the way of the cross: a way of failure, symbolic of his journey to Jerusalem, and his martyr’s death in a place where those on his right and left were criminals. When challenged, James and John said: *We are able*, but they did not understand his explanation. Nor did they grasp, until later, how his life “on the way” was reshaping the image of Godly power at work in the world.

When the indignation at what the brothers had done surfaced, Jesus taught again: *It shall not be so among you!* The new messianic community was not to reflect the power structures of their overlords. *Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you, must be slave of all.* In this community those who exercise themselves in leadership must think of themselves as servants of the community - doing the bidding of others, and as slaves - persons without any rights at all, whose job it is to build up the community, not to laud it over others. Then, in one of the truly memorable statements in the Gospels, Jesus uncovers what the leadership of the real Davidic Messiah looks like: *For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many* [10:45].

In Mark Jesus uses the title Son of Man as a reference to himself. It is a complex title that stands for a human figure vested with the authority of God, whose presence marks a turning point in the world. This is the Human One, whose ministry from the beginning has been marked by great authority. But he did not built up his own grandiose image, nor prepare a great palace from which to rule, surrounded by magnificent associates who tyrannised or demeaned others. His power was exercised in setting others free.

It adds colour to show that this controversy is preceded by the third and most accurate prediction of Jesus' passion and death. It makes the blindness of James and John's request all the more embarrassing. But now, just before the second story of the healing of a blind man, Jesus interprets what the giving of his life will mean. It will be a service that will set people free from the dark powers in life, and enable them to taste the fullness of the new life of the Kingdom. His self-giving is redemptive action that opens up the possibility of life for all, especially for the marginalised and the hopeless. Jesus' way of living as God's servant is directed towards the liberation for others.

What Jesus teaches here does not invalidate all thought of leadership or the exercise of power in the community of faith. But it certainly lays the foundation for the type of leadership that is expected among us. And it also shows that this leadership is directed to those who set their hearts on something other than the ways of the world. Who commit to following and learning from the one who trusted God fully with his life, and was prepared to serve and to suffer for all.

We know only too well that these are hard times for the Church. Our hearts grieve for the controversy raging over the Catholic Church's handling of abuse within its ranks. And competing for space in the media have been reports on the problems our own Church has had in attempting to bring something positive to community life through its schools. Closer to home, on Friday I attended the County Court to engage in the next episode resulting from our failed attempt to give someone a fresh start in life. When things become so chaotic, the danger is that we respond by tightening procedures and becoming obsessed with compliance and conformity. The danger of over managing is that leadership is stifled and we leave no time or place for reflection that nourishes the imagination, allows the dreaming of new dreams, and for fresh actions with liberating intent. It is also possible that we will forget our servant role, and seek to put in place more powerful leaders, thinking this will solve our problems.

All that we do has to be legal, and financially accountable, but the question is: what sort of Gospel leadership are we called to exercise in the community of faith and what shape should it take? Our calling remains: we are to lead as we have been led; our leaders are servants, not tyrants or corporate executives who forget that the church is a community that runs on distributive leadership. Distributive leadership does not mean no one is responsible. It means we have leaders who are able to act with others to support them in doing creative and liberating things that measure up to Christ's standards of accountability that are based on grace and love. Nor does distributive leadership mean we refuse to face the hard issues, the dark side of human endeavour. What it does mean is that we recognize we have to use power, but aim to make use of it differently. Gospel leadership is based on a fundamental principle that the Church is a community that has learned the meaning of the cross: which is that failure is not the end of the story, that it can be life giving. It runs counter to the rules of competition, tyranny, authoritarianism, and patriarchy, because it keeps in view the good of all – the greatest and the least.

It shall not be so among you means that the way we are together is fundamental to being who we are. And *it shall not be so among you* takes its shape from the way the Son of Man was among us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer could well have been thinking of the title Son of Man when he defined Jesus as *the man for others*. Bonhoeffer went further than that. He said: *The church is only truly the church when it lives for others*. Whatever cup we are handed to drink, whatever Baptism we are called to undergo: nothing makes any sense if we lose sight of that.
