

Pentecost 19
3/10/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Hebrews 1:1–4, 2:5–12
Psalm 26
Mark 10:2–16

Becoming like a Child

Sermon preached by Matt Julius

God, may my words be loving and true; and may those who listen discern what is not.
Amen.

Our reading today from the Gospel of Mark the Evangelist, like our Gospel reading from last week, comes from a section of Mark's Gospel which gives us a sort of loose collection of Jesus' teachings. It's kind of like the story is about to get to the good bit — where Jesus actually goes to Jerusalem to be arrested, tried, and crucified — but there's still a couple of teaching moments that need to be squeezed in at the last minute. So it feels like we get a bit of a mishmash: last week we heard something about a rogue exorcist, and the risk of being cast into hell. And today we have heard a teaching about marriage and divorce; and then a teaching about needing to receive God's kingdom like a child.

However, rather than being simply a collection of last-minute teachings before Jesus' passion, I want to suggest that this section of the Gospel aims to prepare us for the road ahead. Jesus has before him a road which leads to death, and as our teacher it seems this is a road we too must follow. To quote the German martyr and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "When Christ calls a person, he bids them come and die."

The Gospel of Mark, while it is the shortest Gospel, doesn't actually tell the life of Jesus in the most straightforward way. Mark at times repeats stories or teachings which the other Gospels don't. Often the stories which are retold from Mark in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are actually shorter in their retelling. And then on top of that Mark sometimes seems simply to repeat himself.

In this transitional section of Mark Jesus predicts more than once that he must go to Jerusalem, be handed over, and die. As often as Jesus repeats this prediction, the disciples fail to understand it. Instead of heeding the foreboding words of their teacher the disciples instead challenge and rebuke Jesus, becoming distracted by fighting amongst themselves over who is greatest among them. Rather than the disciples taking the stark warning from their teacher as a sign to pay closer attention, we see instead the disciples repeatedly getting in the way of Jesus' work. Last week, the disciples tried to get in the way of someone sharing in Jesus' work of freeing the world from demonic forces; and today they try to keep away the children Jesus wishes to embrace and bless.

Setting today's reading into the context of discipleship — and context is everything — allows us to see in Jesus' teaching not only wise counsel, but a deeper lesson about what the path of following Christ is in fact about.

The question about the lawfulness of divorce is, in reality, a non-question. While there was some debate in Jesus' day among the Pharisees — the forerunners of later Rabbinical Judaism, who like Jesus sought to teach their students how to interpret and apply the tradition they had received— While there was some debate among the

Pharisees about how liberally or restrictive the law relating to divorce should be interpreted. What exactly should the threshold for divorce be? The question of *whether* men had the right, under Jewish law, to divorce women was not really at issue. Men had the right to divorce their wives; and there was little women could do about it.

While it can seem strange to modern ears, shaped by the ongoing struggle of feminism for women's autonomy, what Jesus offers in seeming to rule out divorce is actually a subversion of the presumed rights of men. In heightening the seriousness and responsibility of marriage, Jesus makes clear that women cannot be discarded as though they simply do not matter. Men must hold onto the responsibility to provide for women who would otherwise struggle to sustain themselves in a society dominated by men.

Against the received tradition in which men had rights and little responsibilities, and women had little to no rights at all, Jesus seeks to assert the status, dignity, and equality of women. And Jesus makes this assertion not by a technical reading of the law, but by reclaiming the world that creation ought to be: the world that is in fact more true than the one in which we live, because of our hardened hearts.

So while we might take some clues from the subversive teaching Jesus offers here, when we think about the rights of women in our quite different context. We should also be attentive that what is at issue in Jesus' teaching is the concern for the empowerment of women who have no rights, and the reclaiming of a world in which those without status are restored to full dignity and respect.

This is the theme which ties together the teaching about divorce and Jesus' teaching about children. While children today are celebrated as joyous gifts, as signs of hope, protected by child labour laws, and a UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. In the context of the first century children had no legal rights of their own: excluded from participation in public life, or that of the synagogue, until they became "children of the commandment" at their "bar Mitzvah." Much like women, the example of children represents those who were deemed to have no status in Jesus' day. They were under the rule of their father. With no rights to freedom, only obligation.

In these two teachings Jesus is pointing to the focus on those without status in his broader redemptive work. This is what ties together Jesus' movement from claiming that the world is one in which women without rights must be treated as equal, to the claim that we must welcome God's Kingdom as though we were like children. God's work is among the lowly, whom Christ embraces, empowers, and restores. And so we must see the disciple's jostling for greatness as a cautionary tale, and allow ourselves to be led down the path Jesus must tread: the path that leads to Jerusalem, and ultimately the cross.

When, in our reading last week, Jesus talks about being cast into "hell," using the word Gehenna: which refers to the Valley of Hinnom, just outside Jerusalem. Jesus is talking about a place you can visit, a place which was associated with ancient child sacrifice, and which in Jesus' day was likely a rubbish dump — perhaps a smouldering cesspit. In other words, Jesus was talking about the place where the trash goes when it is taken out of Jerusalem. Jesus is talking about the place that it is cursed because it was believed to have been the site where children were sacrificed and discarded.

And so, when Jesus offers a vision of the world which upsets the presumed rights of men over women, when Jesus embraces the child, and offers harsh teachings which come with the threat of being cast onto the cursed rubbish heap, Jesus is trying to get his disciples to understand the path he is on. The seriousness of his call. Jesus is trying to

get his disciples to see, to get us to see, that his way towards Jerusalem is for those who find themselves without status, those who are at risk of becoming refuse. Jesus goes to become one among the many who are discarded, who find themselves in hellish places, who go where the trash goes when it is taken out of Jerusalem.

Jesus is concerned with the discarded many of his day, and those of every day: in Myanmar, Afghanistan, Yemen, Tigray; refugee camps dotted throughout the world; the poor in slums waiting for the pandemic to come; and so many more. While we should certainly hear in this passage a lesson and guide about marriage, and how we should treat vulnerable children. We should, at the same time, hear here the faint echo of Jesus asserting a claim about the world his own saving work will bring. For Jesus the way to the trash heap, for us a path to a renewed order of righteousness and love: that goes through death and beyond it.

And so let us hear as Jesus' disciples the challenge he gave to his first disciples:

If we are concerned with greatness in God's Kingdom, let us not be concerned with ourselves. Let us have the same mind that was in Christ, who emptied himself, and took on the form of a servant.

Let us recall that we are the students, and our teacher is found willingly with the little ones, the disregarded, the broken, the maimed, the blind: those who have no rights. Let us seek out ways we can help those who are struggling — having slipped through the net of love which ought to bind us together.

Let us welcome all who work against the hellish places, where those who are refuse and rejected are sent. May we offer prayers and actions for displaced peoples in refugee camps, in warzones, in the midst of oppression.

And may we do this, not because *we* are good ... but in contrition, knowing that we are still students of Christ's way, still seeking to find our teacher who goes ahead of us to be with the afflicted. We do this because we have become children: lowly ourselves, obliged to others.

'Everyone,' — Holy Scripture says — 'will be salted with fire.'

May we find in our own afflictions the teacher who embraces us like a child

May we find in the afflictions of others the willing one who lifts us out of our stumbling

May we find, and see, and hear the Good News:

In Jesus God reaches out in love, going before us, to bear the struggles we can no longer bear — binds the broken-hearted, gathers us in mercy, stands with us for justice: enacts a new order of righteousness and love. And though the fiery, hellish places seem never to be quenched, the risen ones resists, and resists and overcomes even death.
