

Pentecost 21
17/10/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Psalm 91
Mark 10:35-45

Being served, being seen

In a sentence
Our serving others begins with God's serving us

Most of you are probably familiar with the story of *The Invisible Man* – whether from the original book by H G Wells or one of the many film adaptations. As superpowers go, invisibility is pretty high on the many people's most-desired list. In the stories, the invisible man can move, infiltrate and steal, can be spy, voyeur and even violator with almost absolute freedom. This freedom from detection is the attraction of the power. To be able to see but not to be seen is a power almost divine in its possibilities. It is so, of course, only for the one who is invisible. The most recent adaptation of the story (2020) is a gripping horror movie from the perspective of she who is stalked by an invisible man.

The reading we have heard this morning is a familiar one to most of us, as is its interpretation. Let's, then, render it a little less familiar by proposing that what James and John seek here is the freedom of *invisible men* – now a freedom from *God*. They seek to see *as* God sees, undetected themselves, rather than be *seen by God*.

This will surely strike many as an odd proposal, for it is almost the reverse of the typical reading! Those who know this reading know that it's about the contrast between a certain kind of glory and servanthood. The two disciples ask to sit at his left and right hand in the heavenly court – to be glorified with Jesus and to be *seen* to be glorified. And Jesus turns their attention from seeking elevation to kneeling in service. The story seems to have a simple moral message: don't big-note yourself but rather be helpful to others. This is an important moral message, and one we might forget at least in this or that particular situation; it's good to be reminded of it. Chances are there is more we could do for someone nearby who would really appreciate our help. Give that help.

Yet, there is nothing morally surprising about what Jesus says. We have talkback radio and social media to remind us of these obligations to each other, criticising those who are too full of themselves and lauding those who sacrifice for others' benefit.

On this moral reading, Jesus' (the Son of Man's) servanthood seems to be revealed here as an example for us to emulate: 'I, Jesus, have come to serve and not be glorified; you do the same'. But if this is all Jesus says, he becomes largely irrelevant for the point. If I have a particular respect for Jesus – as James and John certainly did – then it might motivate *me* to hear that Jesus is a servant and I should be one too. But if the story is a common moral requirement hung on Jesus, then the passage is really only important as 'humility for *Christians*', which is the same as 'humility for *atheists*' except that atheists don't have to bother with Jesus to get the point.

Yet there is more than an important moral point to hear in this exchange. Jesus is more than a moral exemplar: the Son of Man...came to serve *and to give his life as a ransom for many*. Here we move past mere helpfulness. A ransom is paid not for those in need of help but for those in captivity, held hostage, imprisoned. The service Jesus brings doesn't *assist* us but fundamentally *liberates* us. Jesus serves in that he – God, if you

like – *sees* us and our need, and acts to change these. We are seen, and what is seen is that we are not free.

Let's look back now to James and John. The moral reading of their request is that they aspire to be glorified and to be *seen* to be glorified, sitting left and right of Jesus in the heavenly court. But we can find deeper meaning in their request. The *effect* of their sitting left and right of Jesus is that they no longer look at him but out to whatever Jesus sees. They ask, then, to see as Jesus sees, rather than to be *seen* by Jesus. They seek to be – with some imagination! – undetected invisible men – unseen by the Jesus whose gaze is properly forward and not to the left or right.

This is not now mere self-importance; it is ignorance of self. The Son of Man comes to serve *you*, James and John, and to ransom *you*. Our gospel passage begins not with the moral imperative to serve which rings so loudly in our activist ears but with but a fundamental gift: the Son of Man serves by ransoming, by setting free: God has detected us. With God, being seen – and our knowing ourselves to be seen – is the meaning of salvation. Sitting at his right and left, James and John would not meet the gaze of Jesus, would not know that he sees them too. They would not know that they too are detected, judged and forgiven.

In the story, Jesus declares that he has no say over who sits left and right of his throne. But we need to push this further. Of course, there *is no* throne or heavenly court – we're in the realm of metaphor here. But to retain the metaphor and refine it, we should now say not that we cannot know who will sit at Jesus' left and right but that in fact there are no seats to Jesus' left or right. We are all *before* the throne; no one is to the side or behind. For this is where we must be if we are to be seen, and to know that we are seen, and accepted.

For this is how we are served: in being seen by God, and knowing that God sees us, and knowing that God's gaze sets us free.

And this is how we become servants ourselves – seeing those we did not see before, not as mere features in our lifescape but as people like us, whom God also sees, not least with *our* eyes.

And then we move to serve as Jesus serves, in order to ransom those who are captive.
