

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jesus told his disciples: “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men who will put him to death; three days after his death he will rise.” They didn’t understand what he was talking about, but were afraid to ask him about it...When they were safely back in Capernaum, he asked them: “what were you discussing on the road?” The silence was deafening. - they had been arguing with one another over who among them was the greatest. He sat down and called the Twelve around them and said: “So you want first place? Then take the last. Be the servant of all!”

Mark 9, 30-37

As I look into the mirror of today’s gospel-reading, I am pressed to ask myself whether I identify with Jesus or with the disciples. Caught up with dreams and expectations of something like importance, success and status, the disciples seem to see greatness in terms of power and being-in-charge. In stark contrast, Jesus sits the Twelve down and rather forcefully challenges them with a vision of spiritual leadership which involves service of all, especially service of those in society who are easily passed over. He then offers them a model for greatness in the kingdom of God in a mere child, not a Chief Priest or a Pharisee or Caesar. To welcome a child, according to Jesus, is to welcome God. Anyone who can do that will begin to look at the world with different eyes. Embedded in the vision that Jesus offers is that whatever we pursue in life will shape our thinking and our action - our values, our political leanings, our ethics, our morality, our spirituality.

I have to admit to being intrigued by the fact that Jesus chose a child as a model of greatness. But, when I stop and recall that there are multiple occasions in the Gospels where Jesus presents children as models for what it means to live authentically in the new way that Jesus is offering, the way he called “the kingdom of God”, I am pushed to explore further. I discovered that in Greek (the language in which the Bible first came to us), the word for child is gender neutral. (Back in the days when I learned English grammar with great fervour, we labelled the word “child” with the term “common gender” and “children” as “masculine and/or feminine”. Even grammar echoes the culture to which we belong. In the time of Jesus, adults, especially adult, male disciples arguing about power and position, regarded children as of no consequence. That attitude prevailed for centuries and survived in English in expressions like “Children should be seen and not heard”. Children, in the time of Jesus, had no rights, no possessions and no voice. Women, too, had almost no rights. They needed approval of their husbands to travel short distances but could go out in public when they were accompanying their children. By welcoming their children, Jesus opened the way for them to be present to hear his teaching and preaching. Today’s gospel-reading, which is paralleled in both Matthew (18, 1-6) and Luke (9,46-48) uses the child to underline the attitude to “greatness” that Jesus requires of those who want to follow him. Pheme Perkins, Professor of Theology and New Testament scholar at Boston College stresses in her book *Jesus As Teacher* (p.36, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 1990) that Jesus, by drawing the Twelve’s attention to a child who was socially invisible, was presenting to them a stand-in for himself. In this context, let’s not forget that when we are among children, they have a knack of cutting us down to size. Unconsciously, they ignore our pretensions and blow away our defences. Yet, according to Jesus, receiving and welcoming children is the same as receiving and welcoming him. Let’s note, too, that already there were forces in play to keep Jesus invisible and voiceless, especially in Jerusalem, which was their destination. There is a clear message here for us to start

seeing the invisible and hearing the voiceless in our society, simply because in noticing the invisible and hearing the voiceless we open ourselves to receive Jesus. To receive him is to welcome the God who missioned him to our world.

Jesus had just told his followers that the pursuit of power and status is meaningless in the kingdom of God that he has been ushering in; that they will find God in the service of this world's dropouts, in the discarded and ignored, in the stranger, in the invisible, in those whom society has silenced. Moreover, he taught them this immediately after telling them a second time that he would be betrayed, executed, and then would rise from the grave three days later. And Mark recorded that, even though they did not understand what he was getting at, they were afraid to ask him to explain what he was talking about. What then was at the root of their fear? Were they afraid that they would hear something they couldn't handle? Were they frightened by what Jesus disclosed because they could not comprehend that the Messiah for whom the world had waited would be assassinated? And still fresh in their minds was the reprimand Peter received when he protested the first time Jesus informed them of his impending betrayal and execution. It could have been any or all of these things that pushed them to remain silent. However, they did what many of us do when we can't or don't want to face unpleasant truths - remain silent. And in response, Jesus let them down lightly by changing tack and matter-of-factly exploding the dreams they had for status and power. Then, after telling them that they would find God in the service of the poor and needy, he gave them something further to reflect upon through his object lesson with the child.

Now we, too, are invited to engage reflectively with both those aspects of today's gospel-reading. Do we accept that we are being invited to discover and encounter God in the service of others? Are there questions about our journey to mature adult faith, a journey of a life-time, that we are hesitant to ask because we fear that the answers to them might disturb our comfort and prod us into further exploration, which could lead us into doubt and deeper questioning? The great theologian, Karl Rahner hinted at this in a somewhat cryptic comment he made when he stated: "The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all." In saying that, he was asserting that, even if we haven't yet noticed, we belong to a Church that is ever evolving, changing and growing; that we will fail to make an impact for good in a world that is also in transition, if we fail to engage with our God whose Spirit is ever creating and revealing something new; if we don't allow ourselves to be captivated by a God who is full of surprises.

Jesus told his disciples (and us) that the way to discover their (our) true selves and to find their (our) place in the kingdom of God is through selfless service. But that will not happen automatically. In time, we will begin to see the face of God, the goodness of God reflected back to us by those we serve. Rahner tells us that reflection on our service and on those we serve will lead us to grow into God. That's not saying that we use the poor and needy to find God. Growing into God will be the by-product of our service and reflection on that service. Anthony de Mello said all this so much better in a little story: A disciple came to a wise teacher and asked: "Is there anything I can do to make *myself* holy?" "As little as you can do to make the sun rise in the morning", replied the teacher. "Then of what use is the spiritual advice you give me?" the disciple asked. "To make sure you are not asleep when the sun begins to rise", the teacher said.