

## Scripture Reading for Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> Sept

**Text: Mark 9:30-37**

<sup>30</sup> They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, <sup>31</sup> because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” <sup>32</sup> But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

<sup>33</sup> They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” <sup>34</sup> But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup> Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.” <sup>36</sup> He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup> “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

## Sermon: “Who Wants To Be First?”!

The writer of Ecclesiastes wrote these well-known words, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven,”<sup>1</sup> and he then goes on to give a list of times to do one thing, followed by times to do the very opposite thing. That list includes, “a time to keep *silence*, and a time to *speak*.”<sup>2</sup> There are two distinct times of silence in our reading today, times when perhaps the disciples should have spoken up.<sup>3</sup> Let’s begin by briefly looking at those incidents; but first, in setting the scene, we also discover there is a time to speak publicly and a time to speak privately.

Last week we read that Jesus was in Caesarea Philippi and there Peter declared boldly that Jesus was the Messiah.<sup>4</sup> Jesus responded by telling the disciples openly that the Son of Man must *suffer*, be killed, and after three days rise again.<sup>5</sup> What happened next was that great moment of Transfiguration, when Peter, James, and John saw a transformed Jesus along with Elijah and Moses on the mountaintop.<sup>6</sup> It was there that the three disciples heard the affirmation of God from a cloud saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”<sup>7</sup> Today, we read that they left that place and returned to Galilee, the region where Jesus called his disciples.<sup>8</sup> And what happens throughout the rest of this chapter is a teaching moment with the Twelve. Mark has just proclaimed the divine words to Peter, James, and John, “Listen to him, listen to Jesus!” and now the spotlight is on the words that Jesus subsequently spoke to his disciples. This was *not* a time for speaking to the crowds, but a time to speak privately to his closest followers. Borrowing from the imagery from the parable of the sower:<sup>9</sup> there is a time for speaking to the crowds and sowing the seeds, but at *this* time, when Jesus is making his way towards Jerusalem knowing what will happen there, he intentionally focuses his efforts on ensuring that 12 specific young plants are nurtured. This was strategically necessary if his disciples were to continue his mission in due course. There is, then, a time for self-reflection *and* a time for proclamation; *both* are important; the apostle Paul knew that too.<sup>10</sup> And it is also true in the life of a church; there is a time to discover who and what we are, who we are following, what we are here to do, and how we mean to do it. And then, in light of that, a time to authentically enact the church’s identity, vision, and mission. As Jesus reiterates his message concerning the kingdom of God to his closest followers, he makes it clear that it is *not* merely a series of propositions that one must *believe* - in other words, give assent to intellectually, with one’s *mind*. No, the gospel message is more than that, they are to be *lived out in practice* with an ethical transformation of lifestyle, and that is - as always -the hardest part, as we will see!

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<sup>1</sup> Eccles 3:1.

<sup>2</sup> Eccles 3:7.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 9:32,34.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 8:29. See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Who-Do-You-Say-That-I-am.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Mark 8:31.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 9:2-13. See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Jesus-Transformed.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Mark 9:7.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 1:16–20.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 4:1-34.

<sup>10</sup> Gal 1:17-18. While there is only a passing mention to Paul’s “wilderness years” they were significant in all that followed.

Jesus then said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.”<sup>11</sup> This is the second of three so-called passion “predictions” in Mark’s Gospel and in all three Jesus enigmatically refers to himself as the “Son of Man.”<sup>12</sup> That title is a little confusing in that it can simply mean a “human being”<sup>13</sup> or it could refer to the mysterious, transcendent, apocalyptic figure, described in Daniel 7:13, who represents a finally-restored Kingdom; or it could somehow mean *both*! This title is used frequently in Mark’s Gospel by Jesus with reference to himself.<sup>14</sup> If we take the meaning of the “Son of Man” to be *both*, then Jesus is redefining the term to mean a *transcendent* being who is nevertheless a *human* being *who suffers* with the world to bring about the kingdom of God.<sup>15</sup> We find this terminology strange today, in part because we are not steeped in the Jewish apocalyptic literature of the time. Even when Jesus speaks plainly and openly it can still be baffling!<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Jesus says he is going “to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” The word “delivered” or “hand over” is loaded, and is often used in the Bible to describe the fatal demise of a prophet; it also perhaps hints at betrayal.<sup>17</sup> We are told “*they* will kill him,” but it is still not clear *who* will do the killing; will it be Jewish or Roman authorities?<sup>18</sup>

Mark then tells us that the disciples “did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.”<sup>19</sup> This is our first time of silence, one born out of *fear*. Perhaps you have experienced that kind of moment of silence too; I know I have. A time when you were afraid to ask the doctor the real questions on your mind for fear of hearing the response. A time when you were afraid to ask the teacher or professor a question because you were afraid that you would be perceived as being ignorant or foolish in public. A time when you were afraid to ask a close friend a specific question because you did not want to damage the relationship, or hear their answer, or be confronted by the truth. Mark often presents the disciples in this confused light. And given that some of these disciples became well-known leaders of the church, perhaps Mark is reminding his audience that church leaders are fallible human beings with feet of clay, just like the rest of us. Why were the disciples afraid? Of course, we do not know for sure. But an important element has to be one of confusion because the concept of a *suffering* Messiah was inconceivable to Jews of the time. Moreover, speaking of “rising after (just) three days” made no sense *either*, not only because the notion of resurrection was controversial amongst the Jews, but those who *did* believe in the ultimate resurrection understood it in the context of the final Judgment

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<sup>11</sup> Mark 9:31.

<sup>12</sup> See Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34.

<sup>13</sup> This is used frequently in Ezekiel and often translated as “mortal” (e.g., Ezek 2:1) and is in contrast to God.

<sup>14</sup> But no gospel writer has Jesus explicitly saying “I am the Son of Man”!

<sup>15</sup> Although not explicit, this can be seen as a forerunner to the doctrine of the *incarnation* – at least in the mind of Mark.

<sup>16</sup> Just because there is only one sentence concerning the predicted passion here, it does not mean that this is all Jesus said!

<sup>17</sup> See echoes in Isa 53:6,12 (LXX). Moreover, comparing and contrasting these three “predictions” is an instructive exercise. For example, the wording has gone from the passive “be killed” (8:31) to the active “they will kill him” (9:31).

<sup>18</sup> Jewish authorities would have had Jesus stoned for blasphemy (as in the case of Stephen in Acts 7:54-60); only the Romans crucified their victims. Boring writes: “Mark does not excuse the human actors in the drama in which Jesus is delivered up. But neither does he see as purely the decision of human actors. Behind the scenes, Mark traces the hand of God.”

<sup>19</sup> Mark 9:32.

Day at the *end* of time. So perhaps we should have some sympathy with the disciples, even if Mark seems to present them in a harsh light! What this does reveal, however, is that our *preconceived* ideas as to how God *should* work in the world can blind us to what God is *actually* doing! Post-resurrection hindsight is a beautiful thing!

Our second moment of silence comes after Jesus and the disciples have arrived at Peter's home in Capernaum, by the Sea of Galilee. This was where it all began for Peter and his brother, Andrew. Jesus asks the disciples a simple question, "What were you arguing about on the way?"<sup>20</sup> There is something heartbreaking, even absurd, about the thought that Jesus knew he was walking toward his death in Jerusalem, yet his closest followers were arguing about who would be the greatest. Their response was silence, the silence of *shame* and *embarrassment* because they knew that their dispute over greatness was inappropriate.<sup>21</sup> While the disciples may have thought that their discussion was in secret, we are reminded again that the "truth will out," and God always knows our hearts. The disciples still had in their minds the image of a *conquering* Messiah and were debating what important roles they would have in the new kingdom. They failed to understand that the kingdom of God does *not* look like a grander version of the greatest human empire. We must also appreciate rank and status were a huge issue within the ethnically and socially diverse church of Mark's audience.<sup>22</sup> I am told that many decades ago, Presbyterian churches - and probably others too - were regarded not simply as a place to worship God, but as a social necessity, especially for recent immigrants to Canada from Europe. It was a place of social respectability and guaranteed influence, a place to network and swap business cards. While some still value church as a source of potential clients, those days are largely gone! If we think that following Jesus will enhance our privilege, status, or self-worth, or even our bank balance, then we are unlikely to hear what God is saying or recognize what God is doing within our community.

Jesus responds to the disciple's silence by sitting down to teach;<sup>23</sup> the act of sitting signifies a formal instruction moment between a rabbi and his followers. It means that whatever the Master says next is important. And Jesus says, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."<sup>24</sup> This is another "hard saying" of Jesus, and the key to unlock this proverb is the ending phrase "servant of all." Jesus was *not* abolishing or despising ambition, but was challenging the disciples' understanding of what "greatness" entailed. His definition of "success" and "achievement" stands society's assumptions and ordering of priorities on their head. Jesus was changing the ambition to *rule* and substituting it with the ambition to *serve*. Would it be that some of our elected politicians would learn from this! This idea may seem ridiculously idealistic. But when you think about it, the people who we admire and consider truly great are *not* the ones who have said to themselves, "How can I use my status to further my own my own personal ambitions?" but have instead said, "How can I use my

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<sup>20</sup> Mark 9:33; see also Mark 10:35-45. And Matt 20:26-27, 23:11; Luke 9:48, 22:26.

<sup>21</sup> Mark 9:34. The discussion of relative rank within the group of disciples is not merely a matter of personal egos, but reflects the conventions of Greek society (and rabbinic schools) in which status and honor were very important.

<sup>22</sup> This is certainly a key theme in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, and likely typical of other churches too.

<sup>23</sup> Mark 9:35a; see also Mark 4:1-2.

<sup>24</sup> Mark 9:35; see also Mark 10:45.

personal gifts and talents to serve the organization [or the state, others, or whatever]?” True selflessness is rare, but where we find it, it is remembered.

Jesus powerfully *enacts* this upside-down teaching of the kingdom of God with the help of a child. The act of a religious teacher embracing a child in his arms is a shocking thing for his male disciples to grasp.<sup>25</sup> So, if we see this as a cuddly photo-opportunity, like a politicians’ kissing babies during an election campaign, then we have completely missed the point!<sup>26</sup> When *our* culture thinks of babies and young children, there is a sentimental image of *innocence*. And even if children become disruptive in a public place, we assume that even young children have individuality and dignity. But in the 1<sup>st</sup> century Mediterranean world, the characteristic feature of children was their lack of status and legal rights.<sup>27</sup> Jesus is *not* teaching a lesson about being *childlike*, meaning innocence - or perhaps as having a simple, believing faith; no, he is speaking to the issue of *status*. Children were socially invisible in those days. And what Jesus says next is equally shocking: “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”<sup>28</sup> Jesus elevates the child to be a “stand-in” for himself, and not just himself – but for *God*. Powerful and provocative words indeed.

It is easy for us to cultivate friendships with those who can *do things for us*, or whose influence can be useful to us. And it is also easy to avoid the society of the person who inconveniently needs our help, or to neglect the humble and ordinary. Jesus is saying no one should expect to gain favor or social standing simply because they are his followers – especially church leaders! All of us who follow in Christ’s footsteps are called to engage with others *without* wondering what benefit we can receive from them. That is counter-cultural enough, but the upside rule of God is even more shocking than that. Jesus is implying, “Seek *not* those who can do things for us, but seek those for whom we can serve, for in this way, we are seeking society itself.” This is *outward* looking, not *self-serving*. And in so doing, we give dignity to others and recognize that we are both made in the image of God, and in God’s kingdom every person is important, regardless of status.

There is a further connection here that is worth making. How does Jesus go from saying “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the *servant of all*”<sup>29</sup> to enacting a parable with a *child*? The person who was the “servant<sup>30</sup> of all” in a household was the lowest in rank of all the servants, the one who would be allowed to eat only what was left after everyone else had eaten their fill. A Greek word

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<sup>25</sup> See also Mark 10:13-16.

<sup>26</sup> People don’t waste their time giving their business cards to children either!

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Gal 4:1-2. Roman authors convey little information about children prior to adolescence, when they enter into adulthood. There appears to have been little interest in children and such, even among medical writers. Romans who needed heirs commonly adopted adults rather than children. And when Jesus pointed to his new family as those who do the will of God (Mark 3:35), he spoke of mother, brothers and sisters, *not* children.

<sup>28</sup> Mark 9:37.

<sup>29</sup> Mark 9:35; see also Mark 10:45.

<sup>30</sup> The Greek word for servant is “*diakonos*,” the root word for our “deacon.”

for “little child” [*paidion*] is sounded similar to a word for “servant” [*pias*]. People in Mark’s audience would have *heard* the word “child” as referring to someone like a servant who served meals to everyone else in the household. Both were seen as without honor or social standing. A child could do nothing to enhance its position or struggles for prestige and influence. It is against this background that the offensiveness of Jesus is teaching becomes clear. In the kingdom of God, a person has honour by embracing a mere child, or one without honour. And in doing so we welcome Jesus the Messiah himself – and even more, we welcome God.<sup>31</sup> That is how we are meant to both think *and* behave.

Our response to all of this might be similar to that of the disciples; a response of silence. If so, is it the silence of fear, of confusion, of shame, or of embarrassment? Or is it the uncomfortable silence of hearing and understanding but not wanting to actually do it? That is certainly an honest, human response – and, frankly, I often feel this way myself. We may be tempted to dismiss these sayings of Jesus concerning the “first and last,” of being a “servant of all,” and of welcoming those without social status. We might like to think this was simply an isolated conversation, and we would probably prefer to pick and choose which sayings of Jesus we like! But last week, you will remember, we heard another proverb: “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their very being, their life?”<sup>32</sup> The gospel writers present wave after wave of these short, pithy sayings and in so doing they present Jesus as a sage in line with the wisdom tradition of Proverbs and other Old Testament books. If we acclaim that Jesus *was* a good teacher, a *wise* man, then it would inconsistent - even foolish - to dismiss these sayings, not least because they may well be the secret of happiness! So, as we reflect on all of this, let us remember there is, then, both a time to think *and* a time to act.

Finally, if we feel challenged by such proverbs, let us remember that while the Holy Spirit convicts us of our attitudes and actions, he also empowers us to live out these teachings! This is fantastic news! That is why Jesus left his Spirit for the Church; he knew that without divine assistance we could never make incremental inroads into a world what rejects and resists such values. So, we have a choice; If we say “no,” the Holy Spirit will not force us to do what we do not want to do. But if we say “yes,” divine help is *always* at hand. So, let us live looking outwards and embracing others, for in doing we welcome God and we find life. Amen.

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<sup>31</sup> Incidentally, the language of doing things “in Jesus’/Christ’s name” was not used during Jesus’ lifetime, but later in the Christian community. Jesus’ name was invoked in prayer and miracles, and people were baptized in Christ’s name. The “name” is not a label, as such, but represents *the person*. It evokes the name as in “*his authority*”, or “acting on his behalf.”

<sup>32</sup> Mark 8:36.