

## **Sermon for Sunday 22 September**

### **17<sup>th</sup> after Trinity**

**Proverbs 31: 10 – end; James 3: 13 – 4: 3, 7 – 8a;  
Mark 9: 30 – 37**

### **Following the Messiah**

I want you to think, if you can, about something you have found impossible to grasp. Something that just made your brain hurt when you tried to understand it. For example, I remember a game called 'Hanabi' which we played (or tried to play) as a family one Christmas. It was a collaborative game, and involved having a good memory. I was so useless at it, and hated it so much, and felt that I was messing up the game for others, so I gave up and let the others play. Have you thought of your impossible thing yet? Maybe a set of impossible instructions for a new gadget? An IKEA assembly job? Whatever it is there's that feeling that you just can't grasp it – and probably don't even want to.

This feeling comes especially I think when we are trying to do something new that we don't want

to be doing. One of the things I most often hear from funeral families is "I've never done this before." It's all uncharted territory, and there is nothing in their experience that they can fall back on. Sadly, I know many of us have been in this position ourselves.

Well, we find the disciples this week still not understanding. They are more or less back where they were last week. Jesus is still trying to teach them that he's going to die and be raised again. In fact, he's given up trying to do anything else as he travels through Galilee so that he can concentrate on this one thing. But they just can't grasp what he's trying to explain. And they're afraid to ask him about it – partly perhaps because of the way he told Peter off, (Mark 8: 32 – 33) and partly because they really don't want to hear and understand it. They'd rather not go there.

So instead, they stick to their own version of what it means to be close associates of the triumphant Messiah. The Messiah who has come to lead his people to victory and be their King; they have an

argument about who will be the greatest in His kingdom. They have a complete misconception about what is going to happen because the truth is too wacky, too unpalatable and too unknown. For the Messiah, God's great leader and King to die a shameful death is not possible. For Him to rise again is equally implausible in their minds. Many Jews believed in the resurrection of the dead at this time, but what they believed was that at the end of time everyone would be resurrected for final judgement by God before taking their places at the great banquet in heaven. They had no concept that one person could be resurrected in advance of this general resurrection. It just didn't make sense.

So when they get to Capernaum and to the house where they are staying, Jesus sits down, calls the disciples to him and begins to address the immediate subject of their argument. It is relevant to what he's trying to make them understand about his death and resurrection because it's about what it means to be a leader in the kingdom of the Messiah. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all,"

he says. (Mark 9:35). Then he does a remarkable thing. He finds a small child from the household, and brings them into the centre of the circle and gives them a hug.

Well, we know Jesus loved children, don't we?

But the point of this is not that Jesus loved children (though I'm certain he did). Because in the first century children were nobodies. Their parents might have loved them, but no one else took any notice of them. They had no status at all as people until they reached adulthood. That's why a little later on in Mark we read of the disciples trying to prevent people from bringing their children to Jesus to be blessed. They thought that children simply weren't worth his time. (Mark 10:13).

So what is Jesus saying when he takes this child in his arms? He's saying that's what the disciples must practise if they want to be great in God's eyes. Not lording it over a kingdom, but welcoming nobodies. Because if they do this, they will be welcoming not only him, but His Father in Heaven too. And it's His Father in

Heaven who stands behind his whole mission on earth. A mission which is not about dominating and being served, but about costly service to others. A mission which will culminate in his complete self-giving for us all on the Cross.

And what else do we see in that picture of Jesus hugging the child? We see the Lord of all showing how precious is each and every human life in the sight of God – no matter how small and apparently insignificant. We are all – in our littleness rather than in our achievements – hugged by God in this moment. So there's no need – ever – to be comparing ourselves with anyone else or wondering who is more 'important', as the disciples had just been doing. Jesus makes his point.

So what have we learned?

The disciples were not so stupid for not understanding what Jesus was telling them – because it was utterly new and unexpected. Neither are we stupid when we cannot understand what God is doing in our lives or in the world more generally. Because Jesus is in the

habit of turning upside-down our expectations and doing a new thing.

We can know that Jesus is patient when we don't understand. He will deal with our evasions of the truth – about him and about ourselves - the things we would rather not hear – and find a way to get through to us.

We can know too that we are warmly and utterly loved and valued by God – not for what we do, but for who we are.

And knowing all of that we may perhaps have the courage to follow Him into the unknown in our own fast-changing and uncertain times – whatever that means for us.

Amen

*Revd Diana Young*