

St Philip and St James

Palma de Mallorca Spain

19th September 2021

The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

Theme: Being the Greatest in the Kingdom of God

Text: Mark 9: 30-37

Introduction

May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer, Amen. **Mark 9: 30a** opens with the statement, **“They went out from there...”** It is a statement that is connecting from somewhere and for it to make sense one has to read backwards. This is a statement that is pointing out to the itinerary of Jesus Christ. Not long ago Jesus and his disciples were at Caesarea Philippi **(9:27)**, far to the north. Then they came to the Mount of Transfiguration, the location of which is uncertain. It could be Mount Hermon, even further north than Caesarea Philippi, or it could be another mountain. After the Transfiguration, they went to the **base** of the mountain, where Jesus healed a boy **(9:14-29)**. It is that from that place that they “went out.” Jesus and his disciples have completed their journey northward and have turned south—toward Jerusalem—toward Jesus’ cross. They are still in relatively friendly Galilee, but will soon leave it.

Galilee is Jesus’ home turf. We know that he was born in Bethlehem of Judea, so how could Galilee become His home turf. I suppose we know the story of Joseph and Mary when they moved to Nazareth early in Jesus’ life to escape Archelaus, one of the Herods. This is how Jesus grew up in Nazareth. He made his home as an adult in Capernaum of Galilee **(Matthew 4:13)**. Most of his healing ministry and teaching took place in Galilee. He called his first disciples in Galilee **(1:16-20)** and will spend his last moments on earth with them in Galilee, that is after His resurrection. **(Matthew 28:16-20)**.

Exegesis of the Text

Mark 9:30-37 occurs within the second major section of **Mark (8:22-10:52)**, which contains a threefold pattern that appears three times. Jesus predicts his passion and resurrection, the disciples don't understand, and Jesus then gives the disciples further teachings. In the first segment of today's gospel (**Mark 9:30-32**), Jesus predicts his death and resurrection for a second time. This is the second and shortest of three passion announcements in this Gospel. In all three, he predicts his suffering, death, and resurrection. Even when Jesus speaks plainly, the disciples do not understand. There is such a great gulf between their expectations and Jesus' predictions that they are afraid even to ask for clarification. They do not want to reveal their ignorance. They have seen Jesus rebuke Peter for misunderstanding (**8:33**), and are reluctant to invite a similar rebuke for asking a question that Jesus might think foolish. And it seems possible that they have caught a glimpse of a terrible future, and prefer not to examine it further.

So what happen next? Verse 34 reveals what happens to the disciples when they sidestep the real questions they are afraid to ask. They turn to arguing with each other over petty issues of rank and status.

Then in verse 33, we are told that they came to Capernaum and entered the house. Mark doesn't specify whose house this is, but the use of the Greek definite article (*te oikia*—the house) suggests that it is not just any house. In verse 33c, Jesus asked them a question, **“What were you arguing about among yourselves on the way?”** Jesus' question brings a hidden subject into the open that provokes an embarrassing silence, making it clear that the disciples understand the inappropriateness of their earlier conversation. While Jesus was telling them to expect his betrayal and death, they were thinking about their place in the kingdom. Verse 35a then reads, **“He sat down, called the twelve, and he said to them”**. The twelve are in the house with Jesus. His sitting down and calling to them is his way of getting their attention, of telling them that he has something important to say, something that they need to hear. Verse 35b, **“If any man wants to be first, he shall be last (*eschatos*) of all and servant (*diakonos*) of all”**. In this context, the Greek word *eschatos* (last) means last, lowest, or least. *Diakonos* (servant) is the Greek word from which we get our word “deacon.” The way that the word is used in the New Testament makes it clear that this kind of servanthood is a humble position. In verse 36a, we read that, **“He took a little child, and set him in their midst”** We could see this child only as an “object lesson, a visual illustration of the point that he is trying to make. But Jesus treats children with too much respect to believe that this child is nothing more than an object to him. Jesus' gesture

must be disturbing to the disciples because, in that time and place, children have so little status, ranking somewhere between women and slaves. Children spend their time in the care of women, and know better than to interfere in men's affairs. For a rabbi to take a child in his arms in the presence of his disciples is remarkable.

Application

In our own time, no one wants to look uninformed, confused, or clueless. We withhold our toughest questions, often within our own churches and within Christian fellowship. We pretend we don't have hard questions. Yet the deepest mysteries of life do indeed elude us. Why do good people suffer? Why are humans so brutal to one another? Why does evil succeed? If God's own Son is betrayed and killed, then no one is safe. Why did God set up a world like this? These are some of the questions that we suppress in our hearts. We withhold these questions at our own peril. Fear, in Mark's gospel, is the antithesis of faith. For example, in the calming of the storm, Jesus asks the disciples: **"Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" (Mark 4:40)**. However, the story in chapter 9 gives us another insight into what the kingdom is like; it is the reception of a child. Jesus links the child to himself and himself to God—thereby establishing a link between the child and God. The person who welcomes a child gets credit for welcoming Jesus, and the person who welcomes Jesus gets credit for welcoming God. By extension then, the person who welcomes a child gets credit for welcoming God. Jesus clearly means that we should accord children with great respect, but the child is also a symbol for anyone who is in need, helpless, or of lowly status. Those who fall in the bracket of the marginalized and vulnerable in society are metaphorically-children. Who are these people in our society today? By extension, we should consider that Jesus is calling us to welcome the homeless, the disabled, the mentally ill, the sick, the uneducated and anyone else who cannot repay our hospitality or make it. With this teaching, Jesus does not abolish ambition, but redirects it—teaching us to be ambitious for the other person instead of for ourselves. Amen.

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