

Ash Wednesday February 14, 2024
Mark 9:30-37

From the Mount of Transfiguration, we move directly to Jesus' second passion/resurrection prediction. In the intervening passages, the disciples' fear and unbelief are clearly portrayed. Peter, James and John come down from the mountain with Jesus. Yet, they have failed to understand what Jesus means by the "rising of the dead." They are exactly the same disciples who were with Jesus when he raised Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter. These are the disciples who have just come down from the mountain where the dead are alive! Moses and Elijah were there with them. Still they just don't get it!

They continue to manifest a lack of faith. They are afraid. Remember - the opposite of faith is not doubt - it is fear. In some Markan stories we see that faith and unbelief are starkly opposed realities. Faith and unbelief live in all of us at the same time. Unbelief is the manifestation of fear. It is our heart's response to Jesus.

With his first prediction Jesus talked about being rejected. With this second passion/resurrection prediction, Jesus predicts being betrayed into humans hands. However, Jesus does not specify into whose hands he will be betrayed. Given the rejection by the scribes, chief priests, and elders that Jesus prophesies, it seems these will be the hands into which he will fall. Yet his fate will not rest solely in their hands. After three days, Jesus will rise again.

Although some translations interpret the Greek verb to rise in the active voice, meaning Jesus will raise himself, neither a Jew nor

Jewish Christian would regard the “raising” as being self-induced. The verb tense used in the Greek, assumes that God is the one who will raise Jesus from the dead. Here Mark juxtaposes human and divine action. Once human hands have done all they possibly can do to Jesus, God will vindicate him through resurrection. The rejection, the betrayal, the religious leaders, the execution, and whatever else “human hands” might do, they will not have the final word. The certainty of his passion is the same certainty behind his prediction of his resurrection. But, this certainty is not held by his disciples.

Unlike the first passion prediction, the second is met with silence. No one rebukes Jesus; no one questions him. However, their silence should not be mistaken for comprehension or concession. They are afraid and maybe confused. Mark is clear; they do not understand what Jesus is talking about. The disciples prefer to talk of glory rather than the cross.

Our worst actions and decisions are often motivated by fear. Fear has a way of leading us to misperceive both threats and opportunities, of prompting impulsive and sometimes irrational behaviour, and of narrowing our vision so it’s difficult to see possibilities. That is why it’s hard to be wise, prudent, or compassionate when we are afraid.

So, the disciples avoid the conversation with Jesus about his passion and resurrection, as they head out to Capernaum. Along the way, the disciples’ heads are filled with thoughts of glory. They had

argued with one another as to who was the greatest. The contrast between cross and glory could hardly be put more starkly. The disciples lack faith and understanding. Once again they show themselves to be rocky ground people. According to Jesus, seeds sown on rocky ground have no roots. When trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.

In a hierarchical society in which many are relegated to the bottom and few have access to the top, a desire for “greatness” is understandable. In many ways, “greatness” equals survival. “Greatness” equals having enough, or as is often the case, having more than enough. “Greatness” equals protection. “Greatness” means your life matters and you cannot so easily be removed, dismissed or tossed aside.

In this ancient society, “greatness” could be attained through the acquisition of honour. This rested upon the three pillars. The first value was wealth which was usually connected to the acquisition of land. The other two, purity and humility, were maintenance values that preserved social boundaries. Purity clearly separated the line between clean and unclean. The ability to live by the purity codes required a certain level of economic means and a livelihood that enabled persons to remain “clean.” Humility insured that everyone knew and stayed in his or her place.

In Mark’s Gospel, these were values that people who occupied the governing class - the High Priest, chief priests, elders, Pilate, and Herod - and the retainer class - scribes, Pharisees, Herodians –

could attain. Many who followed Jesus could not achieve this. The disciples do not question the system. They do not challenge the values that keep over ninety percent of the population as peasants. Instead they argue about who might best participate in the system and rise above the rest. Their conversation is the exact opposite of what Jesus has been trying to teach them. Yet, the subject of their conversation is not surprising, given that oppressed people often aspire to societal rewards from which they have been excluded.

However, by adopting the same standards of access to “greatness” - or whatever social and material rewards a society can bestow - without changing the standards of opportunities for access – means that many will be consigned to the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder from which they can only dream of escaping.

So, Jesus calls the twelve. He wants to set right their covert conversation, which revealed both their fears and their misunderstanding. In one sentence, Jesus completely reverses their concept of greatness: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” “Great” is no longer all-important and highest. On the contrary, “great” is least and lowest. It’s interesting that the only characters in Mark’s Gospel who represent an attitude of service are women, angels, and Jesus.

Next, Jesus places a child before them, presenting them with a startling example of the least in their society. In ancient cultures, children had no status. They were subject to the authority of their fathers, viewed as little more than property. Membership within the

community of Jesus' faithful followers will involve giving status to those who have none.

Hospitality, a major aspect of life in the ancient world, is to be extended to the most unlikely, thus challenging traditional notions of status. Hospitality to the unimportant will be a hallmark of the circle of Jesus' followers, as it was in Jesus' own ministry. And this is all about faithfulness to the one whose rejection and death mark the way to glory. To welcome a child or one of society's least, in Jesus' name, not only welcomes Jesus, but also the one who sent him. That is "greatness" according to Jesus.

This is a great reversal in the name of justice. And it is not so much a question of who is great and who is not, but instead it is a question of welcome. Jesus isn't interested in who we **say** is the greatest or even in who **acts** like the greatest or **looks** to be great. Jesus is interested in who acts with the greatest grace, compassion, and love. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me."

This discipleship lesson encourages us to ask ourselves a few questions: How do we measure "greatness," especially within the Christian community? Have we, like the disciples, adopted our society's standards? Who should "greatness" benefit? The individual who achieved it? Others? Everyone? We need to wrestle with these questions because when "greatness" comes at the expense of other people, it breaks the spirits of those on top as it breaks the backs upon which it is built.

Today, along with Christians around the world, we mark the beginning of Lent. The customs that surround the season have a quality to them that transcends religion. Perhaps most notable is the act of fasting. While Catholics fast on Ash Wednesday and on Fridays during the Lenten season, many people — religious or not — take up this increasingly popular discipline during other times of the year. Fasting has become a part of various health regimes or even a fad.

I read Pope Francis' Ash Wednesday message where he sheds some light on Lent and fasting. Pope Francis has asked people to reconsider the heart of fasting and giving up things for Lent. He says fasting must never become superficial. He quotes the early Christian mystic John Chrysostom who said: "No act of virtue can be great if it is not followed by advantage for others. So, no matter how much time you spend fasting, no matter how much you sleep on a hard floor and eat ashes and sigh continually, if you do no good to others, you do nothing great."

But this isn't to downplay the role of sacrifice. Lent can be a time for penance and self-denial. But, as was explained on Sunday, self-denial is about turning away from our own desires - and turning our hearts to God's desires for us. And once again, Francis stresses that these activities must truly enrich others. He says: "I distrust a charity that costs nothing and does not hurt."

So, if we're going to fast from anything this Lent, Francis suggests that even more than chocolate or alcohol or partying, we fast from

indifference towards others. He writes: “Indifference to our neighbour and to God also represents a real temptation for us Christians. Each year during Lent we need to hear once more the voices of the prophets who cry out and trouble our conscience.”

So, when we fast from this indifference, we can begin to feast on love. In fact, Lent is the perfect time to learn once again, how to love. Jesus, the great protagonist of this holy season, certainly showed us the way. In him, God descends all the way down to bring everyone up. In his life and his ministry, no one is excluded, not even the little children, not the nobodies, not the least who in Jesus’ new society, will be the first.

“What are you giving up for Lent?” It’s a question a lot of people will hear. If you want to change your body, perhaps alcohol and chocolate is the way to go. But if you want to change your heart, a much harder, a more challenging fast is needed. This narrow road is gritty, but it isn’t sterile. It will make room in ourselves and in our hearts, to experience a love that can make us whole and set us free. Now that is indeed something worth fasting for.

Amen.