

22Sep2024 Mark 9.30-37

Proverbs 31:10-31

A capable wife who can find?

She is far more precious than jewels.
The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.
She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.
She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.
She is like the ships of the merchant,
she brings her food from far away.
She rises while it is still night
and provides food for her household
and tasks for her servant-girls.
She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
She girds herself with strength,
and makes her arms strong.
She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night.
She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.
She opens her hand to the poor,

and reaches out her hands to the needy.
She is not afraid for her household when it snows,
for all her household are clothed in crimson.
She makes herself coverings;
her clothing is fine linen and purple.
Her husband is known in the city gates,
taking his seat among the elders of the land.
She makes linen garments and sells them;
she supplies the merchant with sashes.
Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.
She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
She looks well to the ways of her household,
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
Her children rise up and call her happy;
her husband too, and he praises her:
'Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all.'
Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the city gates.

Jas 3:13-4:3,7-8a

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

Inversion of social values

In the Gospel text two weeks ago (Mark 7:24-37), Jesus traveled to the region of Tyre and then to the Decapolis. In this week's text, he is back in his home territory of Galilee, but "he did not want anyone to know it." The reason he did not want anyone to know of his presence? He had some critical teaching to do with his disciples (Mark 9:30).

Some very important things have happened in the meantime. Jesus has begun teaching his disciples about what awaits him in Jerusalem and about the cost of following him (Mark 8:27-38). Jesus has been transfigured on a mountain before Peter, James, and John, appearing in dazzling white clothes conversing with Moses and Elijah (Mark 9:2-8). He has cast a demon out of a boy that his disciples were not able to cast out (Mark 9:14-29).

Now, passing through Galilee, Jesus tries to escape notice while he continues teaching his disciples. And oh, do his disciples need teaching! In spite of all that they have witnessed and heard from Jesus, they still do not seem to have a clue what his mission is about.

Jesus announces once again, in a briefer form than in Mark 8:31, what is to happen to him in the near future: "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again" (Mark 9:31). Yet the disciples still do not understand, and what is more, they are afraid to ask any questions (Mark 9:32). Perhaps they do not *want* to understand this confusing message about a Messiah who suffers and dies. Or perhaps they are afraid to reveal their ignorance. Maybe they remember the rebuke Peter received at Caesarea Philippi and want to avoid similar humiliation. In any case, their fear of asking any questions means that they stay in their state of ignorance and confusion.

Instead of asking questions of Jesus, the disciples turn to arguing with each other. When they arrive in Capernaum, Jesus asks what they were arguing

about along the way. They are silent, too embarrassed to admit that they had been arguing with each other about who was the greatest among them. While Jesus is talking of rejection and death, they are apparently thinking of a continuing movement in which leadership will be an issue. But God's kingship will come about through defeat, not victory, and within it the world's values are turned upside down. Jesus, of course, knows exactly what they have been discussing, and tries once again to teach them that the reign of God reverses the world's ideas of "greatness."

True greatness, Jesus says, is not to be above others, but to be least of all and servant of all. It is not to ascend the social ladder but rather descend it, taking the lowest place. It is not to seek the company of the powerful, but to welcome and care for those without status, such as the child that Jesus embraces and places before his disciples.

In any culture, children are vulnerable; they are dependent on others for their survival and well-being. In the ancient world, their vulnerability was magnified by the fact that they had no legal protection. A child had no status, no rights. A child was basically property just like a slave but less useful. A child certainly had nothing to offer anyone in terms of honor or status. But it is precisely these little ones with whom Jesus identifies. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:37).

Jesus is teaching that the way to gain honour in God's Kingdom is to take on the status of the least honoured, the servant, and to receive, associate with, those who are totally without honour. But basically he had just been telling them that he, himself, the one who should be the most honoured of all, will be totally rejected by the world, be killed in the least honourable way of that time. And why was he to be killed like this? Why would the Messiah have to suffer and die? Not only was this idea completely foreign to Jewish messianic expectations, it was rather threatening for those closest to Jesus. Yet they would have seen how throughout his ministry he associates with the last and the least in society,

Gentile women (Mark 7:24-30), bleeding women (Mark 5:24-34), lepers (Mark 1:40-45), raging demoniacs (Mark 5:1-20), tax collectors and other notorious “sinners” (Mark 1:13-17).

For all of this, he is condemned as an outlaw and blasphemer by the religious authorities, who decide that he is too dangerous and must be eliminated. I want to emphasize that Jesus does not die *in order for* God to be gracious and to forgive sins. Jesus dies *because* he declares the forgiveness of sins. Jesus dies *because* he associates with the impure and the worst of sinners. Jesus dies *because* the religious establishment cannot tolerate the radical grace of God that Jesus proclaims and lives. The radical grace of God that Jesus proclaims and lives completely obliterates the world’s notions of greatness based on status, wealth, achievement, etc. Greatness on Jesus’ terms means being humble, lowly, and associating with those as unimportant as a child. Greatness on Jesus’ terms is risky; it can even get a person killed.

So what does this say to us? This reversal of worldly status in God’s Kingdom is something we need to apply in the different culture of our present circumstances too.

The worldly gain social status today from wealth, fame, beauty or more commonly in New Zealand from cars, houses, educational titles or positions. The New Testament makes it clear that in God’s Kingdom these things have no value.

In New Zealand too we don’t want to stand out too much, or be a ‘tall poppy’, but we also don’t want to do anything to look any more lowly than those around us. For example, we tend to not ask questions that might reveal how much we don’t know. We can even pretend we don’t have hard questions so we look as if we know all there is to know about our faith and how to live as a Christian in today’s world. We don’t want to go outside the comfort zone of how we are regarded. Asking questions that get to the heart of a matter and reveal we don’t know everything we need to know makes us vulnerable. Yet

God's mysteries need to be explored and teased out to be applied today. 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, squabbling among themselves over petty issues of rank and status. When the disciples avoid asking hard questions, they focus on posturing about who is right.

Jesus invites us to be vulnerable, to step outside of the reassurance we find in our present arrangements, the status we enjoy whether that is as an average kiwi or as a person of influence.

Jesus calls those who would follow him to identify with the lowest of the low, to serve even in the most lowly of ways, to associate with those who are of least social status, not as their betters looking after them but as their equals, fellow children of God who care for each other and look after each other and face the complexities of being Jesus' disciples in today's world on the same level. We are all to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God, and whatever status the world might give us is worthless in God's sight.

This is the life I live — it belongs to Jesus — so we have no status except in him