

Sunday September 19th 2021
Humility
Mark 9:30-37/James3:13-4:3,7-8a

In our reading from Mark, we find Jesus and the disciples passing back through Galilee on their way towards Jerusalem. Jesus is trying to teach them about what is going to happen to Him when they get there, and they just aren't getting it. Instead, they are arguing amongst themselves, again, about who amongst them is the greatest. And the two things are connected. They aren't understanding what Jesus is saying at least in part because they already have their own ideas about what will happen in Jerusalem. They still think that the Messiah will rule in an earthly sense, will gather an army like Judah Maccabee had done, will overthrow the Romans, cleanse the temple, make Israel great again. They have, as my grandmother would have said another think coming. It makes sense though, that in the scenario they in mind, they would be vying for position. Each wanting the best position in the cabinet as it were, the most power, the greatest honour. And Jesus tells them, yet again, that this isn't how it works in the Kingdom of Heaven. He tells them, yet again that the First shall be last and the last shall be first and talks about welcoming children. No wonder they were confused.

Years later James, thought to be the brother of Jesus writes to the Jewish Christians who were now dispersed outside of Israel. In our passage he is writing about wisdom, but he also has to address the issue of conflicts and disputes amongst them – they are still arguing amongst themselves and two thousand years later we find that Christians today are still arguing amongst ourselves. We look at the disciples and think that they are slow on the uptake, but here we are. Why do we disagree and argue with each other, in our heads if not out loud? Well of course we all have a tendency to believe that we are right, that our

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understanding of anything that we care about and even some things that we don't even care that much about, is correct. But all sorts of other very complex psychological aspects are at play. We all have different reasons for wanting to be right, wanting to feel ourselves better than other people, needing to be acknowledged, craving things we don't have, desiring the approval and praise of others, needing to be needed. None of us believe ourselves to be arrogant, and yet we constantly have the arrogance to judge others and to believe ourselves to be better than others in all sorts of ways. Just a small example, we have taken our grandchildren out on a couple of occasions recently and I have found myself judging other parents because of the way their children behave, because they don't discipline their children the way I think they should, because their children are overweight etc. Maybe instead of judging them, I should have compassion on them, because they have not had the advantages or the education that I have had, but even then, I might be accused of being patronising. These are people I know nothing about. In fact, there is only one thing about them that I can be sure about and that is that Jesus loves them so much that He died for them. Our motives are often mixed and most of us rarely care to examine why we think and act the way that we do and to question ourselves and our motives. But perhaps we should.

James reminds us of Jesus teaching, that there are two kinds of wisdom. The wisdom of the world and the wisdom from above, from God Himself. Worldly wisdom cares about earthly values, is unspiritual and devilish. It's characteristics, as we saw in the disciples and we see in ourselves, are jealousy and selfish ambition. It results in disorder and every vile practice. Wisdom from above, from God is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and

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good fruits and has no trace of partiality or hypocrisy. It results in a harvest of righteousness sown in peace.

If we ask ourselves the question, what sort of person do I want to be, I hope that as followers of Jesus we would all want to be the person who is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy etc. And hopefully as we are filled more with the Holy Spirit and we grow in faith and love, the gap between who we are and who we aspire to be is closing. In one sense we shouldn't be beating ourselves up. Jesus knows that we are frail and fallible human beings, who have been shaped and sometimes damaged by our environments and experiences and he came to forgive us and restore us. But at the same time, we are adults and whatever our circumstances we still make choices that we have to be prepared to be accountable for. We have a choice and are given the ability to take captive every thought. This means that every time we have a judgemental, unkind, unworthy thought we can choose to reject it and repent of it, or dwell on it, run with it, speak it out to others.

And don't forget, James, like Jesus is all about action as well as faith. Our inner lives will dictate our actions. But even if our actions are good and kind and loving if our thoughts, our hearts, our spirits are not, then our good deeds are worth nothing. I was talking to the children in assembly during the week and I asked them what they thought sin was. The first child who answered absolutely nailed it – sin is making bad choices, he said. This is a great way of understanding it because it makes us face our responsibility, we have made a bad choice to think or speak or act without mercy, love, compassion, and kindness. There may be all

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sorts of reasons why we are predisposed to think and speak and act the way that we do, but whatever they are – we still have free will and have made a choice.

I was teaching the children about the Lord's prayer, and we pray, forgive us our bad choices as we forgive others who have made bad choices. We want God to have compassion on us, take into account the reasons for our frailty and our mistakes and forgive us for our bad choices, but so often we do not want to extend that compassion and mercy to others. This is really all about pride and humility, one of the things that God prizes above all others is true humility - humility that genuinely puts others first. Shane Claiborne who is a Christian pacifist and activist in the States worked for a while with Mother Theresa. He asked one of the other nuns why Mother Theresa's feet were so bad. Well, the nun answered, we are given old shoes and Mother always chooses last and often has the worst ones, that fit badly and over the years her feet have become deformed, but she does not complain.

This may all sound hard and sometimes it is – no-one promised that the narrow path would be an easy one to walk. But James sums the solution up well so I will give him the last word from The Message version of the Bible:

“God goes against the wilful proud; God gives grace to the willing humble. So let God work His will in you. Yell a loud no to the devil and watch him scamper. Say a quiet yes to God and He'll be there in no time. Quit dabbling in sin. Purify your inner life.”

Amen