

Jesus Reveals Himself: Saviour, Servant, Friend of Children
Sermon for the Parish of South Darebin, 22 September 2024

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*Through the written word, and the spoken word, may we know your Living Word,
Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen*

Our Bible often asks questions of us. We who read it and study it are in conversation with it, and with God through doing so. In our gospel of today, we find Jesus, as so often, opening a conversation by asking a question – in this case, “What were you discussing out on the road?”

This comes in the midst of an almost manic time of rushing around, healing, teaching, and Jesus revealing things about himself that no one understands or wants to understand. In these two chapters he and his disciples have hiked from Bethsaida in the north of Lake Galilee up north following the Jordan river over mountainous country near the Golan Heights to Caesarea Philippi, then came the mystical transfiguration experience, and a return to the lake, arriving as we’ve heard at Capernaum. Towards the end of this journeying, Jesus kept away from the crowds who had been following him relentlessly, wishing to “spend more time with his disciples and teach them,” just as we sometimes need quiet times to focus more intently on our own travels with Jesus by studying the scriptures and by prayer.

During this long march up and down northern Israel, Jesus triggered core conversations by questions, including asking his disciples: “Who do people say I am?” and then, “Who do you say I am?” Then he told them about the foretold fate of the Son of Man, a mysterious Biblical figure who would be killed and would rise three days later. “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me... If you want to save your life, you must lose it.” In our gospel today he returns to this troubling message. The disciples still didn’t understand and, we are told, were afraid to ask him what he meant. Especially, who is this Son of Man? Remember, we know in hindsight that this is one of the many messianic or Christological titles for Jesus, about which many books have been written and a million sermons preached. However, this was all new, and perplexing, to the disciples, who would have heard of the Son of Man figure only through one or two apocalyptic texts including in the book of Daniel. The disciples were worried, naturally, to admit they just didn’t get it, they didn’t readily identify their Rabbi as that Son of Man. They had seen and heard enough, and knew Jesus well enough, that they just wanted to stay with him, stay close to him, and they didn’t want their convulsive journey with him to end. Nor did they want him to leave them.

This whole section of Mark’s gospel is framed at the start and at the close by stories of Jesus making blind people see. So also the disciples, at first blind to Jesus’ core mission, gain sight, if slowly. They are flawed, very human, figures. The Bible is all the more convincing because its leading figures are hardly heroes. The

disciples needed to learn that there is no such thing as a stupid question, that often, the true stupidity lies in not asking, and that true faith often helps us to ask better questions rather than to find correct answers – just as most scientific discoveries have been made by people asking the right questions.

Jesus himself of course asked, in anguish, such a question when he was on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He asked that question because of his faith, not despite it. He was not proclaiming God’s absence, but he was proclaiming his sense of abandonment in that terrible hour.

The disciples did not yet, then, comprehend who Jesus really was. But they did however understand, instinctively, how human groups usually shape themselves. Jesus couldn’t help overhearing that they were arguing about who was the greatest. That was a topic that was familiar. They got intuitively, what sociologists tell us today. People take up roles or are assigned roles, and they assume positions of greater or lesser control over the views and behaviour of their groups. Even though Jesus’ inner circle, his disciples, numbered just twelve, they still wanted to order themselves in influence or priority of some sort.

Jesus loved paradoxes. They reveal hidden and powerful and unlikely truths. “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you...” And here, in our passage today: “Whoever wants to be first must take the last place.”

He then reached out of the circle of friends in the home they’d just settled into in Capernaum, to pick up a child who lived in the house, and told them “whoever welcomes a little child like this on my behalf welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me also welcomes my Father who sent me.” He was commending the family in whose house they were staying, and he was also adding a picture to his words about leadership and humility. He is not saying that children are great and should be respected as leaders, nor that greatness is shown by being childlike. He is saying that greatness is in welcoming a child, who is vulnerable, powerless and dependent. In Jesus’ day children had no rights or status.

Greatness is found not in what we have accomplished and gained for ourselves, but in what we have done and given to the least, to the vulnerable and poor and dependent – people who know need. And we must all know need, in its many manifestations, if we are to accept Jesus himself. Those who know and own everything, need nothing, they do not need God. Most importantly for us, Jesus himself welcomes us and gathers each of us in his arms as he did that child in a Capernaum home, even when – or especially when – we are uncertain or confused, or feel diminished, and don’t fully understand what is happening in or around us or around our lives.

Jesus’ message is not, however, a call to be passive. In a world without machines, in the world of Palestine 2,000 years ago, servants performed a great number of routine tasks including of course looking after people. To be a servant did not and does not mean to retreat from the world. Rather, it meant and means the opposite, to be engaged fully, but with a different approach from those who owned or own the world or felt or feel entitled to such service. We honour Jesus by serving and loving those around us who have needs they can’t meet themselves.

And greatness comes not from the position we occupy, but the space and place we offer others. In Jesus' world, the educated are not greater than the uneducated, the wealthier than the poorer, the better looking than the less good looking, the gifted than the less gifted.

How to Make Australia, or wherever, Great Again? What kind of a heart, what way of life, can make us great, or appreciate greatness in others? Let's think of people we each know and have met, who we might consider great. In a long career in journalism, I have interviewed many people who are or were strong, important, colourful characters, some with dominant personalities. But as for the greatest, rather intriguingly I'd name three of them who each won the Nobel Peace Prize: the humble financial inclusion pioneer Muhammad Yunus who has recently been invited to run his country Bangladesh, Liu Xiaobo the Chinese philosopher and courageous man of peace who died jailed by the communist regime, and pre-eminently Mother Theresa, whose ego was so transparent she scarcely seemed to exist except as a pointer to others, and to God. They each enlarged our world, and the worlds of the poor. They spoke the truth even when it hurt. And they inspired others, and kept themselves out of the spotlight into which others sometimes pushed them in an often unwelcome way.

We must read the gospels, and the letters in the New Testament, diligently in order to gain a sense of how Jesus appeared to people during his time on Earth, as he incarnated and modelled the life of the servant, the life that we gain the greatest joy from following. He is the way, the truth and the life. Putting other people first is not just wise leadership advice, it is the truth about human life from the one who embodied it. Whoever welcomes the powerless, welcomes Jesus and receives his redeeming love.

As a footnote, as our diocese starts the process towards selecting a new archbishop to replace Philip Freier, what qualities are we seeking to discern? A deacon is the servant of the people of God, and is the church's ambassador to the broader community. A priest is the servant to the servant. And a bishop is the servant to the servant of the servant. "Whoever wants to be first must... be the servant of everyone else," Jesus says in our gospel reading. We are surely seeking an archbishop – just as we are a priest for South Darebin parish – who embodies the leadership that Jesus spoke about in that house in Capernaum, who welcomes all including the vulnerable and lost as Jesus did, holding and welcoming that little child there.

We pray:

Jesus, Son of Man, teacher, servant of all, friend of children, Saviour of the world, help us to follow wherever you lead us and to love you in loving others.

Amen.

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