

Lagging Behind (Mark 10: 32-45)*Pentecost XXII*

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‘They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid’ (Mark 10:32). It’s a vivid little scene and a telling symbol – Jesus ahead, steadfast on his journey to Jerusalem; those with him lagging behind, at once amazed and fearful. The cause of their unsettlement? Well, you’ll remember from last week that Jesus has just had an exchange with another would-be disciple – a rich man who wanted to know what he must do to enter fully into life with God. Jesus had told him to hand himself over without remainder, to sell what he owned, give away the proceeds and then to ‘come, follow me’. But the rich man had balked at the cost and gone away sad.

It’s true that those already with Jesus are in a different situation. Many probably didn’t own that much to start with and they’ve followed him this far. Even so, they’re reminded of the uncompromising, counter-cultural quality of Jesus’ teaching and call. No wonder they’re a little scared. Where’s it all going? What might it ultimately require of them? In this context, Jesus’ next words are hardly reassuring. He deliberately draws aside his closest followers, the twelve, and says them: See, we’re going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes. They in turn will hand him over to the Gentiles.

In other words, I just want to give you a heads up – every authority in the ancient world, religious and civil, Jewish and Gentile, is going to condemn me to die. There’ll be no avenue of appeal, no place to take refuge, no real security in the city. Oh, and by the way, it’s not going to be just any death, but a public, shameful, polluting death. They’ll mock me, spit on me, flog me, and kill me. But three days later, the Son of Man will rise again.

Reasonably significant news, you'd think – and not the first time he's mentioned it. Yet the response of James and John which follows immediately: 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you', might almost be paraphrased: 'Hey Jesus – that's enough about you – let's talk about us for a while'. Of course, this isn't a verbatim transcript. Maybe James and John weren't that obviously clueless and self-absorbed. Or maybe underneath their words was an intensifying dread which left them simply unable to be with what Jesus has said. As if they can't bear it and so latch on to what seems the only glimpse of an upside, the hint of glory and the possibility of their sharing in it.

Well, whatever was going on in the background of this encounter, however we conceive the psychology of these two brothers, it's pretty clear the writer of Mark's gospel wants us to know that his disciples could barely hear, let alone grasp, what Jesus was saying. They just didn't want to know that the power of God is utterly unlike the power of the emperor. They didn't want to know their teacher and master was headed straight for failure, vulnerability and shame – and them along with him. And they could not understand how any of this had to do with the restoration of Israel, the joy of God's reign come on earth. The paradigm shift he was putting before them was just too huge.

We think we know better. And at some level, thanks to their witness, we do. Over two thousand years of Christianity means that major elements of this paradigm shift are familiar to us and even percolate through our culture as a whole. We believe that divine favour is not dependent on or proved by our wealth and power of influence. Most of us feel uneasy about jostling overtly for position at others' expense, and even programs for business leaders talk about the efficacy of servant leadership. Yet it's one thing to believe all this and to 'play nicely' according to the new norms of our Christianised culture. But wholly to enter into the dynamic of Jesus' life and death? That's still a real stretch, a radical shift. And here we're not so different at all from James and John.

For haven't we all felt the need to make something of ourselves, to be affirmed and well regarded? Don't we all fear and avoid the place of rejection, the oblivion of death, abandonment and shame? And aren't all of us, from time to time, tempted to compete with, compare ourselves to or manipulate others to get what we think we need, to stave off humiliation and failure? Maybe we're not as crude as the sons of Zebedee, but the dynamics that underlie their request are still operative in most of us. And it seems to me that this is the depth dimension of what Jesus is seeking to shift in us. A different way to be, different ground on which to stand which results in a whole different way of being together. A new humanity. 'You know that among the Gentiles ... their rulers lord it over them ... But it is not so among you' (10:42-43). But if we're going to make this shift, it involves coming to trust that we no longer have to do what they were trying to do – make themselves mean something, make themselves significant. It's about knowing that our lives are simply given, that we're here by God's free determination, and all there is to do is let ourselves receive, be loved and so become capable of sharing that same freedom to be and to love with others.

It doesn't sound so hard, does it? But how tightly we're enmeshed in those other dynamics. I've been reflecting this week on some of my default patterns ... how a totally irrational terror of failing, or making a fool of myself can suddenly grip me, make me anxious, clutching, grasping ... a kind of dread descends. I wonder what it might be for you? What hurts? What persistently critical voices dog you? Even after we see these patterns, and recognise them as destructive, false, pointless – they can continue to grip us ... as if our lives depend on them. Talk about 'lagging behind'.

It's the same at the level of community. Think about the patterns of social and political life ... how people and groups so often seek their being at each other's expense, bullying, unkindness, abuse, the paralysing fear of being shamed or being found inadequate and all that that leads us to do to one another. We know we do

better when we don't live like this, we know we're happier, more creative ... and yet so often we're stuck in them.

Jesus' whole mission is to make visible, to reveal to us that God is not caught up in, not part of these patterns and systems. Then (and this is the really hard part) he wants to generate sufficient trust in us that we can actually dare to let them go. Or if that's not possible (because when we're really caught by them, we can't just drop them), generate sufficient trust that we can dare to be *with* them deeply enough that they begin to dissolve, resolve, be at peace. The gospel is about freedom, liberation from old patterns as the source and guarantors of our security, identity, worth. But the depth of these patterns, their hold on us and our hold on them, can be so profound that we cannot extricate ourselves. They're so profound it takes Jesus undergoing death to forge a way out. Because it's only his willingness to undergo these death-dealing patterns of ours, entrusting himself to God and coming out alive on the other side, that makes possible our faith that God's life and love are larger. Otherwise, how would we know they're not the truth?

And it's in his company that we can dare to tread the same road to freedom – to 'drink the cup that he drinks, and be baptized with the baptism that he is baptized with'. Faith means, no matter how dreadful it feels, that the place of shame, failure, humiliation, fear and pain is not godforsaken. Rowan Williams says: Jesus is 'already in the heart of the world, holding the suffering and pain in himself and transforming it by the sheer indestructible energy of his mercy'.¹ And if we can just stay with it, with him, we too will be brought through safe on the other side.

'They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid' (Mark 10:32). We are right to be a little afraid, I think, of this journey with Jesus.

But if we do not go, how will we become free? And if not us, then who?

¹ Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark* (London: SPCK, 2014), p.47.