

On Desiring Greatness (Mark 10. 32-45)

© Sarah Bachelard

This is the third time in Mark's gospel that Jesus foretells his suffering and death. It's the third time his words jut up against an entirely different set of preoccupations and ambitions, exposing with increasing starkness the distance between his consciousness and the consciousness of those around him.

Jesus' first foretelling of his passion had followed Peter's unexpected declaration of recognition. Jesus had asked his disciples, 'Who do you say that I am?', and Peter had his breath-through moment: 'You are the Messiah'. Immediately following this recognition, Jesus began to teach them he must undergo 'great suffering ... and be killed, and after three days rise again'. But Peter has no capacity to comprehend this logic. He rebukes Jesus, who then responds by speaking for the first time about the necessity of losing one's life to save it, of relinquishing possession to gain the gift of fuller life.

Half a chapter later, Jesus again speaks of his death and resurrection (9. 31-32), and again, according to the gospel, 'they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him'. Instead, they talked among themselves. They'd all been walking to Capernaum, and when they arrived Jesus asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ... they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest'. It's not surprising, really. They're beginning to conceive themselves as part of a Messianic movement, bringing in a new regime. Naturally, they're interested in allocating the spoils of the kingdom, the places of honour in the new Israel.

Again, Jesus responds with a teaching on the necessity of self-relinquishment, of letting go their preoccupation with their own status and honour. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all", he says. And he took a little child and put it among them, and then took the child in his arms, saying "Whoever welcomes

one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me”’. Which is an extraordinary teaching about the nature of God in a culture where children, together with slaves, were at the bottom of the social ladder, ‘poor, needy and without status’.¹ God is like this, Jesus is saying, and you need to be willing to occupy this place, to identify with this place, if you want to be at home in and know the power of God.

Finally, half a chapter further on, comes the passage we heard today. A third time, Jesus foretells his death and resurrection, amplifying the depiction of the comprehensive humiliation he’s to suffer at the hands of both Jewish and Gentile authorities. Yet again, his words seem utterly incomprehensible to his disciples. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said that, ‘if a lion could talk, we would not understand him’. He meant, I think, that even if a lion could speak words in our language, the life-world of the lion – the lion’s experience, its essential presuppositions and imaginative sense of things – would be so utterly different to ours, that we’d be unable to make anything of his words.

Sometimes it seems like that with Jesus. He says something, but it’s as if those who hear him simply cannot make anything of it. How else to explain the fantastically obtuse response of James and John – two of Jesus’ closest friends? He’s told them he’s soon to suffer horribly and to die, and all they want to talk about is their career trajectory. Their preoccupation remains, ‘who is the greatest’, and it seems the other disciples are also still consumed by the same question. Otherwise, why are they so mad with James and John for getting the jump on them? Once again, Jesus sits them all down, trying to give them a new way of imagining the point of their lives and of their journey with him, trying to break them into a different perception of the nature of God’s reality and their own true good.

I find this a striking sequence. Every time Jesus speaks of his coming humiliation and death, his willingness to yield to failure and the loss of his life and honour, his disciples are portrayed as obsessed with securing theirs. It’s as if the

¹ Bonnie Thurston, *Preaching Mark* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2002), p.107.

gospel writer wants us to see just how profound a conversion is required if we're to become capable of being in the world as Jesus is. And I think the depth of this conversion becomes evident when we consider the way Christian practice has often distorted or corrupted Jesus' teaching on this very point.

What do I mean? Well, when Jesus seeks to undo his disciples' compulsion to be first or better than one another, he's not seeking to limit their potential or constrain their attainment of excellence. Rather he's seeking to liberate them from their obsession with securing their value on the basis of their standing relative to others. He wants them to be capable of sharing and generating life with and for one another without competing for place at each others' expense; he wants them to offer their gifts to serve the life of the whole beyond rivalry and competition, beyond fear and shame. Thus, he seeks to draw them into the condition of simple belonging and trust, children of the one God, members of one of another. This is what it should mean to be the community of Christ.

But all too often in the church, rather than fundamentally transfiguring our preoccupation with status and reward, Jesus' words about servanthood and self-relinquishment have been co-opted into the same old framework. In other words, rather than giving up our desire for being honoured, admired, justified, we treat what Jesus says as offering a different strategy for obtaining those very things. As if he's saying, 'look, in the kingdom of God, you're not going to get there by lording it over people, being rich and powerful and overtly successful' – how crass. No – how you get there is by being 'umble, self-deprecating, a servant-leader. C.S. Lewis once quipped about the woman who 'lived to serve others; you could tell the 'others' by their hunted look'. There can be a self-conscious exercise of Christian so-called 'virtue', in which the basic dynamic of seeking advantage through moral performance, being better than others, 'holier than thou', remains unchanged. This is the 'slave morality', the pathology of virtue dishonest about its own motives, that the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche so devastatingly identified in the pious hypocrisy of 19th century bourgeois Christianity.

But Jesus isn't giving us a new strategy for possessing status, advantage and honour – whether in this world or the next. Rather, he's daring us to realise that none of these things matter. He's daring us to trust that we, like him, can inhabit the place of shame and not be destroyed by it; we, like him, can share life with all, without needing to be 'seen' only with those who augment our standing. He's calling us to become, like him, bearers of a different possibility for human being, enjoying the liberty of the children of God which generates mercy, justice and peace.

But it's one thing to recognise this as a possibility. It's another to realise it in our lived experience. I know how easily I'm hooked into comparing myself with others, both negatively and positively. How do we actually become free as Jesus was free, no longer driven by a compulsion to become great, to be 'someone', in order just to be OK? How do we become, in practice, unselfconsciously given to God and so free to be wholly in service of love? For me, this speaks to the profound significance of our practice of meditation. This is a practice that transforms at root our desire to obtain advantage and significance, because it gradually decreases our self-preoccupation, our anxious concern about whether we're good enough or successful or worthwhile enough to matter. Every time we take our attention away from our thoughts and sound the mantra, we are being simplified. Our attention is other-centred; our internal drama becomes less interesting; we learn to trust that our life is simply given. And so, over time, we become content simply to be and thus free to respond to the call of our lives for its own sake – for nothing. This is true humility; it's the purity of heart from which true service arises, where categories of 'first' and 'last', 'great' and 'despised', dissolve in the love of God.

I'm conscious of the irony in preaching on this passage at this moment in our history – where many who are or who aspire to be rulers of this world define their greatness explicitly in terms of domination over others and the power to wield death, where there's no longer even the pretence of virtue. In the face of such ruthlessness, Jesus' setting a little child in our midst as his image of an alternate way of being seems underwhelming to say the least. Yet this is what he offers. The

promise is that as we're yielded to the giving life of God in the radical simplicity of trust and receptivity, we're connected to an entirely different order, where death has no more dominion and love will always make a way. It doesn't mean we're saved from bodily death and suffering, nor that tyranny and war do not wreak havoc. It means simply that these are not the final word, and that behind all the fear and darkness of the world there is 'a more final fact, God's vulnerable love drawing us forward'.² To be joined to that love, to offer ourselves in its service, we commit ourselves anew.

² Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross*, second edition (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), p.22.