

## Sermon Year B Proper 20, Mark 8.27-end

Over the last few weeks we have been on the road with Jesus and his disciples. Setting out from Galilee we went to Tyre, from there we skirted Galilee making our way to the region of the Decapolis, then on to the Mount of the Transfiguration possibly Mount Hermon, rather than the traditional site of Mount Tabor. Today we are back in Galilee our destination a house in Capernaum.

Already back in Galilee still on the way Jesus teaches the disciples secretly about his impending death as we heard in today's gospel. Mark sums up the last segment of a long journey succinctly writing, "They (Jesus and the disciples) 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.'"

On Tuesday the 14 September the Church marked Holy Cross Day. The day when we recall the significance of the cross for Christians throughout the world and down the ages. It reminds us death is an ever present reality of life we cannot escape, as much as we may seek to. One calls to mind some words from the hymn Abide with me,

"Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away  
Change and decay in all around I see  
O Thou who changest not, abide with me".

Modern technology seems to make the prize of everlasting life in the confines of the material universe an alluring possibility. I myself am more than a little skeptical wishing this manmade hell on no one. Any commemoration of the cross by Christians will remind them of sin conquered and death vanquished, therefore we put our trust in the Lord, who has ordered all things well. We never live for this world alone or certainly not just for ourselves.

It is on the last segment of this long journey that will take them to a house in Capernaum that a dispute breaks out about succession framed as greatness

amongst the followers. It makes sense. Jesus is teaching his followers about his impending death and his rising. Who shall carry on his work once he has ceased? Some of them feel qualified, able, destined, suitable, great and all involved in the dispute over estimating their ability to fill his shoes. It will take the whole Body of Christ filled by the Holy Spirit down the ages to even come close to measuring up as Christ's ambassadors, to say nothing of filling the shoes of a carpenter's son, who from the beginning is building a habitation out the stuff of eternal things for men and women from all walks of life. All are welcome.

Jesus then goes on famously to speak about servanthood and its parameters saying "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." This is a central point in Jesus' teaching about ministry in his name. Never ever make yourself first and never ring fence your ministry. The ministry that all of us who are Christians are called to, are to heed and are to be shaped by. It is far reaching. Remember a few weeks ago some of Jesus' followers left him, because his teaching was too hard for them. From a worldly perspective it gets harder the more you understand what Jesus is asking of the Church, the Body of Christ and each of us as always tin everything o put God first. Counterintuitively to what we hear you can say that one remains surprised by how many are still willing today to take up their cross and follow him. Each learning in time what it means for them within the Body of Christ. Learning which ring fencing they must tear down and the boundaries they must cross. Christians without borders. Never first, but always last. This can never be very attractive, unless we see it in Christ's terms of serving all. Put in that context it is a beautiful teaching methinks, but it is too hard for many and yet we know that this is the way and anything less is compromise. It is selling the Gospel short. We should always however remind ourselves that we are mere mortals, we are the Church, but individually as members, our resources are limited and that Christ comes to complete our joy and fill our lives with goodness. Called to be a pleasing fragrance unto the Lord.

To underline his point Jesus takes a child. He places the child first amongst the disciples and then takes the child out of their midst and into his arms a twofold action saying, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who

sent me.” If we are going to have any idea of what this saying means we need to picture it in our mind’s eye. Once the picture is built up only then should we put the words to it that Jesus speaks. Remember Jesus is in a house in Capernaum. A house he knows well. He confronts the disciples about what they have been speaking about along the way as he has taught them about his impending death. He then takes a child (one of perhaps many in the house) and places it first in the midst of the twelve. Only then does he take 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.”

Remember what was said above about servanthood? Servanthood is a central point in Jesus’ teaching about ministry. Never ever make yourself first and never ever ring fence your ministry. This demanding ministry receives one more qualification by which it becomes clear why it must be so. It is a central point in Jesus’ teaching about ministry. I repeat never ever make yourself first and never ever ring fence your ministry, because all are children including the disciples and all are to be welcomed by those who live in the grace of the cross as children needing attention, care, love and teaching... instruction... rebuke... formation... redemption. When we welcome people in the name of Christ we welcome Christ and whoever welcomes Christ welcomes the one who sent him. In this movement of welcoming there is movement towards God first through those who faithfully live their ministry in view of the cross and then through the Son who hangs from the cross and then through the God the Father who welcomes. There is blessing each step along the way.

We are in Creationtide. If we are going to get it right about anything, be it a policy, about our place in the world and in society, death, and our relationship to creation, the need for sustainability it will be by allowing ourselves to be taught, instructed, shaped, rebuked and atoned by Christ. It will be by allowing our motives to be judged by the gospel word. And they will be. From a Christian perspective, in this case, so much of what we do is futile, because it is not shaped by the cross. It is not lived in view of the cross, which does bring judgement on us, but also importantly provides direction. We can lament that in some places Christian communities are dying, but we must remember the hand we have and have had in at as churches and as individuals. We are not innocent.

I end by recalling the statute of Mary with Child in the central Marian shrine for Austria and in Central Europe in Mariazell. A statue in which Mary has taken the baby Jesus into her arms. It is a rather crude statue. The beauty is in its simplicity and especially it's message for those who follow. Mary with elongated finger unmistakably points to Jesus. She is nothing without Jesus. May our response to the challenges confronting us all living in creation and with creation as part of God's creation always begin by looking to Jesus through whom all things are made and have their being.