

**Sermon on 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Creation Time 2018 – 23rd September 2018 – by Canon David Hodgson at All Saints Church Wokingham**

Gospel - Mark 9: 30 – 37

*Creation Time theme: Passing our planet on – responding to the generosity of God*

*Today's Theme: The bliss of giving- the gift of service*

We've reached the fourth Sunday in the season of prayer we call Creation Time – the season when we give thanks for God's gift of life and the earth, and pray for help in our care of God's creation. As a theme for the season this year we're looking at God's generosity and how do we generously respond to the generosity of God? Do we in fact – receive God's gift with gratitude and do we respond in like kind with generosity? And in particular this Sunday I want to focus on the gift of service – and what I mean here is that grace from God which enables us to give help to others

It's well-known feature of human nature – though we often forget it – that we see what we want to see, or what we expect to see. We tend to ignore anything that goes against our expectations of how things ought to be. Modern psychological studies have confirmed this evidentially, yet it's been known intuitively by human beings for ever. There's the old saying "There are none so blind as those who will not see".

The gospel reading today is the second of three episodes in Mark's gospel when Jesus tells the disciples who he really is and what will happen to him. And again they cannot take it in. It's interesting to notice that these three episodes of the disciples failing to see Jesus for who he is, despite being informed clearly, are wrapped around in the narrative of the gospel by two stories of blind people being given sight by Jesus.

Mark's gospel wants us to see clearly who Jesus really is, what God whom Jesus reveals is really like, and therefore in whom truly we are challenged to place our faith. But the disciples don't get it.

The first episode of incomprehension by the disciples was you recall when Jesus asked them who they thought he was. Peter came up with what appeared to be the right insightful answer "You are the Messiah". But as soon as Peter heard that this involved Jesus suffering, being rejected and ultimately killed, he refused to take it on board. And neither Peter nor the other disciples picked up on the other vital piece of information Jesus imparted, that after three days he would rise again. That was completely outside of their expectations of who the Messiah was and what he would do.

Undaunted by the disciples' lack of understanding, Jesus persisted in teaching them; who he was and what would happen to him. It is this second attempt of Jesus that we heard in today's gospel reading. This time Jesus used the term "Son of Man" to describe himself. They would know as Jews well-versed in the Hebrew Scriptures that this title referred to a vision of the prophet Daniel in which a human figure appears before God and is given ultimate authority and an eternal kingship. So yes Jesus was identifying himself as God's chosen king. Yet he reinforced the earlier information that he would suffer, and die, and rise again. But still, for the disciples the prospect of the Messiah being taken and killed just did not compute. Their expectation was that when God comes in glory, it is surely to conquer his enemies, not to "be handed over into the hands of men, and they will kill him" (31). So, "they did not understand what he was saying and they were afraid to ask him" (verse 32). The very idea that God's own king could be defeated and rejected stunned them so much they could not, dare not, ask for more information for fear of what other expectations they had would be turned on their heads. What Jesus told them – how he would suffer and be killed – was such a shock to the disciples – comparable to the shock we might get if the Archbishop stood up one day and said "God is dead".

In fact, not only did the disciples refuse to talk about what Jesus had told them, they continued their own conversation based purely on their own expectations - that he was destined to be an all-conquering king gaining power and influence and that as his close associates they would be

awarded positions of eminence in his kingdom – and so they started arguing about who would be the greatest among them in this new world. Jesus challenged them and again they fell into silence. He taught them again about how different from their expectations is God's way and God's kingdom. He upended their understanding of power totally when he placed a child – the least powerful of any member of their society - in front of them. In the kingdom of God, the greatest is the one who serves others; who is “the servant of all” and especially who serves the most vulnerable, who dedicates their efforts to helping those with the least power of all.

The disciples and many Christians since them failed to grasp Christ revealed that God is not the lynchpin in an edifice of human illusion that somehow we can use to create a system of belief and morality that will give us total control and power over our lives and the life of our community. Even God- we learn in the crucifixion - even God yields something to possess it more deeply; endures loss and suffering for the sake of the joy that lies ahead.

God knows human beings left to our own devices generally are interested in being better off than others – more possessions or more status or more power or more recognition or more respect – we define success in terms of being bigger, better, greater. No-one is immune from this virus – it's been circulating in the human bloodstream forever. Christian communities and church leaders, the Church as an institution, isn't immune either to this gravitational pull of worldly success. Power, status, importance, influence are big temptations. The disciples didn't understand that Jesus might be so unsuccessful that he'd end up crucified. What they were talking about – who is the greatest - showed them still to be in the fevered grip of this mind-set of being bigger and better than our neighbours – of being powerful and influential and having control over others.

Jesus undermined the whole notion of life as a striving to get power for ourselves over others - by reversing the polarity – to be first you must be last and be the servant of all. The crucifixion is the seal of that way God does things – God 's own Son gave up his power to dominate– he was faithful and vulnerable and the powerful crushed him. And then he rose again – the resurrection was God's affirmation of the truth and the power of his way of service.

The past 70 years have seen a race for ever-increasing wealth and power in the leading societies of the world giving little heed to the detrimental impact on the planet. More lately some are starting to wake up to the disfiguring impact of social inequality and competitiveness on relationships between different groups and sections of the community, on personal relationships and on mental health. As a result, we are leaving, have left, many stumbling blocks for the children of tomorrow – financial instability, social and personal confusion, environmental depletion. Without action to stop and reverse many current trends we are passing on a planet that is more divided, less sustainable and more dangerous. Remember we are all prone to see what we expect to see; and that has consequences in both ways – we fail to see how just how much damage has been done and is being done to the earth and to our communal and personal lives by carrying on with our accepted ways of living, and at the same time we also fail to see the opportunities there are to make changes and to move to a better pathway to the future in our own lives and in the wider world.

In truth we have some very precious gifts – spiritual gifts of our faith and our values – the gift of the gospel of Christ - which we have received from our spiritual fathers and mothers, either our actual parents or others who nurtured us in spiritual matters – and we need to pass on that faith and those values - because this will be the greatest resource for our children and children's children as they respond and face the challenges of the future.

We might ask how we could pass on the gift of the gospel of Christ to a world and a generation which seems at times suspicious – and perhaps rightly so – of all attempts to define their reality for them, to sell them another ideology alongside all the others – of all attempts to suck them into an organisation too much like all the other organisations which have used them for its own ends. Perhaps the answer is far simpler than we expect – not because it's straightforward like an off the shelf fix – but simple in the elegant sense. We could pass on the gift of the gospel of Christ by

becoming more like Christ; that is, looking for, praying for and so bringing to life in our lives, God's gift of service, Christ-like service. It's important to shape service in the model of Christ. We all know the distorted shape of so-called service which is really about getting you to fit into another's agenda – the likes of Facebook which make play that their service is free and always will be, whilst being less than free with clarity about what they are taking and making from us. Christ-like service authentically seeks to serve rather than to be served; it really is about helping another, it is the essence of what giving is all about. You could say that the gift of service is the gift of giving itself, because genuine help and assistance offered to others seeks no payback. The Apostle Paul's words sum up the Christ-like example that he had tried to model as a response to God's generous grace in his farewell speech to the church leaders of Ephesus: "remember the words of the Lord that he said, "It is a blissful thing to give rather than to receive."