

The Meaning of Greatness

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25th Sunday of Ordinary Time
"Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me"

"Lasset die Kindlein zu mir kommen" (Let the little children come to me) | Anonymous | 1841 | Dorotheum | PD-US Public Domain

As we move further into the liturgical year, it should become evident that there are fewer demonstrations of power and teaching authority, although they will continue to occur, e.g., the healing of the boy with a demon (Mark 9:19-29). The emphasis is ever more on preparing his disciples for the time when Jesus will not be among them in an earthly form. The text for this Sunday is commonly referred to as Christ's second passion/resurrection prediction.

Between the first set of prediction/instructions and our Sunday gospel we have following pericopes:

- a. The Transfiguration (9:2-8) where Peter doesn't know what to say and the three disciples are terrified.
- b. The discussion coming down the mountain (9:9-13) where the disciples fail to understand Jesus' comment about "rising from the dead," yet these disciples were with Jesus when he raised a twelve-year-old girl from the dead (5:35-43) and they had just come down from the mountain where the dead (Moses and Elijah) were alive.

- c. The other disciples fail to cast out an evil spirit (9:14-29). Jesus is appalled at their *faithlessness* -- "You *faithless* generation" (v. 19). But I would also draw your attention to v.24: "*I believe; help my unbelief.*" It is often the case that we are not either/or but rather both/and when it comes to believing or not believing. While we trust God, we fear, and that combination often leads us to misunderstanding

The return through Galilee from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem is not the occasion for a new mission but for instruction of the disciples. Each of the three passion predictions in this section of the Gospel is followed by instructions on discipleship and incidents that show that the disciples have not understood Jesus' teaching, just as Peter, James, and John did not understand what resurrection meant earlier during the Transfiguration scene (9:10). [Perkins, 636]

As Stoffregen notes, each of the passion (/resurrection) predictions in Mark follows the same pattern.

	1st	2nd	3rd
Passion Prediction	8:31-32a	9:30-31	10:32-34
Misunderstanding	8:23b-33	9:32-34	10:35-40
Instructions	8:34-9:1	9:35-37	10:41-45

This 2nd prediction alters several elements from the previous version. Instead of being rejected by the religious leaders, Jesus is to be handed over to "*men.*" The verb has shifted from the passive "*be killed*" (8:31) to the active "*they will kill him*" (9:31).

The disciples' response points to a deepening separation from Jesus. Earlier, Peter had protested the first passion prediction (8:31–33), and the group, who failed to understand the meaning of resurrection, discussed it and asked Jesus whether Elijah would indeed have to come first (9:10–11). Now they are afraid to ask Jesus about the word they do not understand (v. 32). Fear plays a prominent role in the passion narrative. Fear and silence conclude the whole Gospel when the women flee from the tomb (16:8).

In any event, Jesus continues to teach (v. 31, imperfect verbs = continuous action in the past). The disciples continued to not understand (*agnoeo*) and continued to be afraid to ask him about his teachings (v. 32, imperfect verbs again). The other verb "to fear" (*phobeomai*) is used as the opposite of faith in 4:41; 5:36. It is also an emotion that the disciples frequently have: 4:41; 6:50; 10:32 (3rd passion prediction); 16:8. The three disciples are "terrified" (*ekphobos* -- a related word) at the transfiguration (9:6). It seems discipleship is ever the ongoing process.

Unasked Questions

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In the scene immediately preceding our Gospel, the disciples experienced an inability to cast out a demon from a young child – a great change from their initial missionary experience. They are perplexed and do not understand. While Jesus' answer is simple (v.29), it is a teaching moment for the disciples – more prayer is needed. The disciples are equipped with more witness that the average person Jesus encounters in this Galilean ministry, still they are perplexed about the meta-narrative that is the story of Jesus.

Although Jesus has already told them of his coming suffering and death, here in v.31 he is more descriptive: "*The Son of Man is to be handed over to men and they will kill him, and three days after his death he will rise.*" If the disciples had been listening to the prediction in Mark 8 they would remember

the divine imperative: “*The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days.*” (Mark 8:31). If the first prediction spoke to divine intent, this second prediction specifies that the passion will be at the hands of men (*lit.* in Greek) – something that comes to pass during Passion Week (14:41). The second prediction is briefer and lacking the stress on suffering and rejection. Lane [337] speculates that these elements are already restated in 9:12 and given Mark’s sparse narrative style would not be repeated again.

Lane holds that readers should not too quickly pass over the language of 9:31 using “to deliver up” or “hand over.” This is the language that appears in the context of lawsuits, but more importantly appears in the Jewish theology of martyrdom. It is in the context of martyrdom that “handing over” is more than simply coming under the power of another. Rather the term points to the fulfillment of God’s will as expressed in Scripture. Particularly in martyrdom, God is the one who permits (or hinders) the handing over in fulfillment of his deeper purposes. “Into the hands of men” reinforces the concept of abandonment, as is evident in Jer 33 where the full phrase occurs: “given over into the hands of the people to be put to death.” After the betrayal by Judas and Jesus’ arrest, it was natural to associate the terminology of “handing over” with that act of treachery (cf. Chs. 3:19; 14:41). The background of the term in Scripture, however, indicates that the thought is more profound: Jesus will be delivered into the hands of men by God, and what takes place on the level of historical occurrence has ultimate significance because it reveals the eschatological action of God. The precise wording of verse 31 may have been influenced by Isa. 53:6, 12, where the expiatory death of the Suffering Servant serves as a keen memory of the people. Jesus’ statement indicates that God’s redemptive will provides the key to understanding his passion.

In any case, the disciples do not understand. As noted earlier, this is a response that is increasingly present among the disciples. It was the reaction at the Transfiguration (9:2-8) and led to a discussion on the way down the mountainside. The discussion coming down the mountain (9:9-13) centers on Jesus’ comment about “rising from the dead.” At least in that context there is some connection. Even if these disciples, who were with Jesus when he raised a twelve-year-old girl from the dead (5:35-43), and they had just witnessed Jesus speaking with “the dead” (Moses and Elijah) but who were quite alive – even if they are having trouble processing it all, they are speaking among themselves about what it all means.

Getting Organized?

But following the second prediction of the passion there seems to be a non-sequiter in process: ³³ *They came to Capernaum and, once inside the house, he began to ask them, “What were you arguing about on the way?”* ³⁴ *But they remained silent. They had been discussing among themselves on the way who was the greatest.*

Again the disciples remain silent. Before they were afraid to ask Jesus about the meaning of his teaching. Here they think they are trying to avoid embarrassment. If before they worried that Jesus would condemn them for not understanding his teaching, now, are they worried that he will condemn them for desiring and talking about greatness? They do not yet fathom Jesus as a gracious savior.

Why would greatness be the topic of the discussion? Not many scholars address this question, just taking it as a given or chalking it up to culture. But I think it deserves a little more attention. In the first passion prediction (Mark 8) Peter rebukes Jesus after he has spoken about suffering and death. Perhaps it is in the first hearing that shock fuels the disbelief. One should remember that when the blind man is restored to sight, it occurs in a sequence of actions on Jesus’ part. Might it be that the same dynamic is in play here? With the shock of the first prediction passed, they are able to “see” a little more. They have accepted Jesus’ death is on the horizon – after all they too can see the growing opposition among secular and religious leaders. If Jesus has been preparing them for the time when he will not be with them, it might be quite natural for them to discuss the same thing among themselves: “When Jesus dies, we need to continue the mission – we need to get organized. OK – who is going to be in charge?” But if the disciples

have not yet come to terms with the meaning of the words, “*and three days after his death he will rise,*” then the mission they are organizing for it is not the right mission.

Another reason might be that each disciple was embarrassed that he/she did not understand Jesus’ teaching and assumed the other did. It is not hard to imagine raising up a topic – greatness – would have been a means to change the subject to something they did understand (or so they thought). All the while, they remained unaware that none of them understood.

But then again, it might be that the lesson of the Transfiguration has begun to set it and the disciples are beginning to understand something of the glory that awaits them in the promise of Jesus. Yet it does not seem that they have a sense of what must precede it: taking up your cross. The disciples have yet to ponder the place of suffering and service. They are thinking of discipleship in categories of power rather than of serving tables.

The discussion gives us some indication of the time and culture where questions of precedence and rank are not far from the surface. We see it in Jesus’ parable about seating oneself at the banquet table: “*For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.*” (Luke 14:7-14) Throughout the gospel there are hints that divine standards will collide with human convention.

Greatest in the Kingdom

³⁵ *Then he sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, “If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.”* ³⁶ *Taking a child he placed it in their midst, and putting his arms around it he said to them,* ³⁷ *“Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me.”*

The conversation in Capernaum is no longer addressed to “disciples” but to “*the Twelve.*” In the gospel of Mark, the Twelve (*hoi dōdeka*) are a group of disciples chosen by Jesus to be his special companions (Mark 3:14; 4:10; 11:11; 14:17). They were particularly instructed by Jesus (Mark 9:35; 10:32) and were sent by him to proclaim the coming of the kingdom and to cast out demons (Mark 3:14, 16; 6:7). While we naturally add the phrase “Apostles” to the text, the emphasis is not on the 12 people in charge after the Resurrection, but rather the restoration of Israel as the people of God. The number was symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel (cf. Matt 19:28; Luke 22:30; Rev 21:12–14) and pointed to the eschatological nature of Jesus’ mission. [AYBD 670] We can see this clearly in the Matthean account: ²⁷ *Then Peter said to him in reply, “We have given up everything and followed you. What will there be for us?”* ²⁸ *Jesus said to them, “Amen, I say to you that you who have followed me, in the new age, when the Son of Man is seated on his throne of glory, will yourselves sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”* (Matthew 19:27–28)

Those closest to Jesus do not understand and so they must be again taught. The phrase “*Then he sat down*” shows Jesus taking the formal position of the teacher. The content of his teaching is directed at the content of the discussion among the Twelve and their presumption that human convention will suit the working of the Kingdom. Jesus intends to overturn those presumptions with two short, vivid lessons:

- Greatness does not consist of who is first served, but rather in self-sacrificing service to all, and
- Greatness consists of seeing with the eyes of God – being able to see the dignity and worth in a child, someone convention held to be a non-person.

Servant of all

Regarding the first teaching, Lane [339-40] writes: “The question of precedence was resolved on the authority of Jesus: he who wishes to be first must be determined to be the servant of all. This surprising reversal of all human ideas of greatness and rank is a practical application of the great commandment of love for one’s neighbor (Ch. 12:31; Lev. 19:18) and a reaffirmation of the call to self-denial which is the precondition for following Jesus (Ch. 8:34, where the formulation “whoever wishes to come after me” is

parallel to “whoever wishes to be first” in Ch. 9:35). The order of life for the disciples in their relationship to each other is to be the service of love. By transforming the question of greatness into the task-orientation of service, Jesus established a new pattern for human relationships which leaves no occasion for strife or opposition toward one another.”

Seeing with the eyes of God

If the first teaching was troublesome, the next would have been downright shocking. In our time we have a different view of children. We hold children to be innocent and precious. This does not seem to have been the view of the 1st century. In ancient culture, children had no status. They were subject to the authority of their fathers, viewed as little more than property. In Roman culture adults were adopted, not children. Consider St. Paul’s statement: “*I mean that as long as the heir is not of age, he is no different from a slave, although he is the owner of everything, but he is under the supervision of guardians and administrators until the date set by his father.*” (Gal 4:1-2) If this is said of the heir, can you imagine the attitude for children in general? Perkins [p. 637] writes: “... the child in antiquity was a non-person... Children should have been with the women, not hanging around the teacher and his students (cf. 10:13-16). To say that those who receive Jesus receive God does not constitute a problem. A person’s emissary was commonly understood to be like the one who sent him. But to insist that receiving a child might have some value for male disciples is almost inconceivable.”

Perkins echoes the text in Matthew 10, “*Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me....*” but is pointing out that Jesus is telling the disciples that while there are times you will indeed be my emissary, this is not the problem at hand. The problem is that the Twelve cannot conceive of welcoming the least important people in society, those ranked lowest in human convention. Yet Jesus is saying, “you’ll need to work your way down to the most marginal and lowest (by human convention) in order to find me. I am last of all.”

Remember the recent episode when the disciples were unable to cast out the demon from the child in 9:14-29? The disciples ask Jesus “...*in private, “Why could we not drive it out?” He said to them, “This kind can only come out through prayer.”* One wonders if the disciples did not think the child was worthy of their time, effort, or prayer? They were willing to command the demon to come one, but not to pray for the child.

The Kingdom of God involves giving status to those who have none. The disciples are not to be like children, but to be like Jesus who embraces the child, the one held to be least of all in human convention.

A young rabbinical student asked the rabbi, “Rabbi, why don’t people see God today as they did in the olden days?” The wise old man put his hands on the student’s shoulders and said, “The answer, my son, is because no one is willing to stoop so low.”

Notes

Mark 9:31 *crucified*: Some scholars speculate that Jesus, speaking Aramaic, might have used a word that could be understood as either “exaltation” or as “crucifixion.” They argue that this dual meaning might be the source of confusion and questioning.

Mark 9:31 “*The Son of Man is to be handed over to men and they will kill him, and three days after his death he will rise.*” This is the second of three predictions in this central unit of Mark (8:31; 10:32–34). There is also mention of the Son of Man’s rising from the dead in 9:9, which (according to 9:10) the disciples did not understand. This is the briefest of the three predictive passages. The note of betrayal may echo Isa 53:6, 12 (also in Paul, Rom 4:25; 8:32).

Mark 9:32 *They didn’t understand ... they were afraid to ask.* As in 9:10, the disciples did not comprehend the remarks about the resurrection.

Mark 9:33 *What were you arguing about on the way?* The verb for “discuss” often means “to reason”; here it suggests that sides have been taken and the issue has been argued in detail. Perhaps the question about who was greatest was sparked by the fact that only Peter, James, and John were taken up the mountain with Jesus (9:2–8).

Mark 9:35 *greatest*. I do not often cite the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas, but the record of this encounter does seem to reflect the natural and human concern: “The disciples said to Jesus, “We know that you will go away from us. Who is it that will then be great over us?”” [logion 12]

Mark 9:35 *If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.* Jesus’ reply went in the exact opposite direction as the debate; he stressed that those who took the last place and served others stood in first place, as far as he was concerned. The term “servant” (*diakonos*) stands for one engaged in everyday service, such as Elisha was for Elijah (Josephus *Antiquities* 8.354), or like government officials, table attendants, and couriers (Rom 13:4; Col 4:7).

Mark 9:36 *little child*. Mark uses the general term for a child (*paidion*), so it is not clear just how old he was. Since Jesus took the child into his arms, he was probably small. Children were largely ignored in the ancient world, so they are good examples of people lacking status.

Mark 9:37 *Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me.* In bringing up a “little child” (*paidion*), Jesus illustrated his point about service (Luke 9:48) in a natural way, since the word for “child” in Greek (*pais*) could also be used to mean “servant.”

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