

Sermon 23rd September 2018

9:34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

9:35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

9:36 Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them,

9:37 "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

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It has been wonderful this year and these last few weeks somewhat coming to a crescendo this week the 19th celebrating the work, worth and presence of women from the days of the suffrage movement, 1893 to our modern day suffragettes.

There have been many amazing stories told and many that have not been put into print.

One of a number of stories that caught my eye was that of teenage mums, in part because Lexie and Pauline having spoken about schooling for teenage mums, in

part I have walked with teenage mums and their struggles for identity, walked with parents who disavowed their children having children and parents who have desperately wanted to be part of their pregnant teenagers lives, but have been estranged, left in isolation feeling hopelessly desolate, while children who are now adults struggle with issues of identity.

So when Mark tells this story, having Jesus taking a little child, putting her among them, embracing her and saying to them, “whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,” these stories in this year of celebrating the suffrage movement resonate, they connect.

As is always the question that when the Gospel writers have Jesus doing something which in 21st C. seems to be nothing that extraordinary, like taking a child to confront the egos of grown men, where in fact in 1st C this is immensely extraordinary. This story is extremely challenging to some and liberating to others.

It is in our living memory that when a child was born out of wedlock they were labelled ... illegitimate, one of no identity, non-person. I know of children, I know parents who disavowed these children and would revolt at the presence of such children. In fact prior to a certain date in NZ Law a child born out of wedlock was in law labelled illegitimate. Do you know what date that was? Parliament took the law of classifying a child born out of wedlock off the law books in 1969. Just as in 1893

women gained legitimacy to vote, children after and prior to 1969 gained their legitimacy to be fully human, in both changes of law, just because they received legitimacy didn't enter or alter the minds and attitudes of everybody.

I was interested to read that women like Kate Shepherd belong to the WCTU Women's Christian Temperance Union, as did my great grandmother here in Auckland. They were very much a Christian Organisation that confronted social issues, and back in the 1890s it was theological, not ideological issues, that divided feminists. Kate Shepherd was an accomplished public speaker and writer, she had a clear, logical intellect, and could also conduct argument without rancour. Kate Sheppard was motivated by humanitarian principles and a strong sense of justice: 'All that separates, whether of race, class, creed, or sex, what is inhuman, and must be overcome'. Hers was a quietly determined, persuasive and disarmingly feminine voice. Though their watch words were XX"**Agitate - Educate - Legislate**" I wouldn't say they were quietly disarming.

Mark's story is about the sage Jesus also motivated by humanitarian principles and a strong sense of justice: and I am sure would have embraced the motto "**Agitate - Educate - Legislate.**"

XX Jesus passion of inviting others to re-imagine their world: to enlarge their picture of God to include all of humanity, and to enlarge their feelings of self to include,

neighbour is demonstrated in this act of taking a young street child, an urchin, set the child in front of everyone so everyone could see, and put his arms around her.

To understand the power of Jesus' symbolic action we should not think of children simply as loving and innocent or even vulnerable. At the time of Jesus children, were 'non-persons'.

Where a child was a nobody unless its father accepted it. It was commonplace and legal for children to be 'exposed' in the gutter or rubbish dump, to die, or to be taken by someone who wished to rear a slave.

Contrary to the disciples' desire for positions of power and importance, Jesus is suggesting, it seems to me, they should be more concerned with honouring into their midst the poor and vulnerable, and stop vying for position and power.

Reimagining their world by enlarging their feelings of self to include, neighbour... was the challenge once they got over their egos.

Jesus had a radical way of ignoring and pushing the social boundaries of his society!

Jesus had a way of 'getting up the nose' of those who exercised power, those who valued themselves over others!

Through his actions, Jesus' caring for vulnerable human beings suggests in these actions we come face to face with the divine.

This is an important story and everyone should hear/share it.

New Testament scholar William Loader suggests: "Human beings have mostly attributed value to those who have power. At some levels that has been physical power... It is equally about having wealth, political power, family power... conventional wisdom says such people are of greatest value.

For me the way of Jesus in the 21st C is when a country wants to measure it's well-being not by it's GDP, but by how humanely it deals with the most vulnerable individuals living within its realm.

But Jesus had to deal with these big egos, the egos that were vying for the most important position in the coming reign of God, which of us is the greatest, I am, no I am, no I am, no I am Goes the conversation.

As our often quoted William Loader suggests: Fortunately Jesus is not an egotist, obsessed with protecting his reputation, but someone who cares about people

I love the way that Jesus deals with these egotists, he takes them gently aside ...

'If anyone wants to be first, let them be last of all and servant/slave of all.' The message will be repeated, where Jesus contrasts this with leadership styles of the day where people love to flaunt their power and authority. The message is directly subversive of the conventional wisdom of his day.

XXXXX finish ?

Human beings, societies have mostly attributed value to those who have power. At some levels that has been physical power: an army. It is equally about having wealth, political power, family power. Perception that one is more important than others because of ones knowledge or possessions or occupation. It is having a sense of one's own importance on the basis that you can make others inferior, putting yourself up by putting others down. Such powerful people are engaging in the subordination and demeaning of others.

It can also be that some people are powerful, through wealth and have authority without such motives of subjugating or demeaning others. We then should attribute greatness to such people – because of their humility their care and compassion for others.

Jesus is challenging both stances: people wanting to use power to establish their own value and people using power as the measure of value of human beings. Jesus subverts both.

True greatness is not found in this sort of exhibition of power. True greatness is to be like Jesus, a truly powerful person, but who valued himself not because of power but because of his being and his doing the will of God, which meant lowliness, and obedience.

Mark has Jesus subverting the conventional wisdom the norm, values of the day.

He is a king, but wearing a crown of thorns.

He takes a non-person and says this is about being the kin-dom of God

He is the Christ, but broken on the cross

While in service for others.

When Jesus says the greatest is to be the slave (9:35; 10:43,44), that is a shocking contrast. The focus is not only the status, 'slave', but also the function, 'serving' like a slave. Greatness is about being an obedient, loving and serving person. Mark 10:45 makes that clear: 'The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many'.

Our poetry, our hymns, our liturgies are often very revealing. When we hail Jesus as king and mean by it the king of love, the servant king, we have to work very hard not to allow that to be subsumed under the more popular images of greatness which Jesus was trying to subvert.

The image of the child, in itself, throws the focus more on the lowliness of status, than on the service. The child is vulnerable. But then the focus shifts from the child's status back again to caring, this time for the child. Caring for vulnerable human beings is part of what caring is about. To take on a child in this way is to take on Jesus and to take on Jesus in this way is to take on God.

In solidarity with lowliness and vulnerability with acts of caring and love we then know what it is like to be in the presence of the divine. Jesus confronts the egotists the 'heroic loners' the 'lone rangers', and is promoting community which provides mutual caring and support for everyone, especially the vulnerable.

The spirit of compassion and inclusiveness is at the heart of Jesus' life...

Once we have heard the cry of the planet,
or our neighbour's cultural or religious pain,
or the most vulnerable in our society,
we do need to make a choice, as to what we will do.