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Psalm 19.7-14  
Mark 9.38-50  
30th September 2018**

## Jesus – never knowingly understated

*Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ, the Living Word – so in his name we pray and for his voice we listen. Amen*.  
  
I was at a dinner the other day in London and a fellow guest had spotted I was wearing a clerical collar. Our conversation seemed to be going fine until he asked me what team I played for! Sorry I said – what do you mean? Well, I’m Anglican – what are you? Well, I had to think and then I remembered! Baptist, I said. He looked disappointed and said: Oh, what a shame!!  
  
Actually we continued to have a good chat together, but I couldn’t help feeling I hadn’t quite come up to the mark. As a non-Anglican I wasn’t really part of the ‘in crowd’!  
  
Now there is something of that in today’s reading from Mark and it’s the disciple John who verbalises this prejudice and disapproval of others.  
  
It’s almost a ‘copyright’ issue in John’s mind and he reports his fears to Jesus. Other people are going around in Jesus’ name and performing the miracle of exorcism. There is an implicit accusation here and it’s: they are not one of us.

Jesus, as reported by Mark, doesn’t hold with John’s fears and exclusivism. Jesus isn’t an egotist or an elitist. Instead he says that if people are being made whole and finding a sense of liberation then good work is being done and those doing it shouldn’t be criticised by the disciples.  
  
Instead of condemning those who had, as it were, infringed the copyright of the ‘brand’, Jesus affirms them and in doing so rebukes John and his fears.  
  
Now there’s every reason to believe that Mark includes this story in his gospel because by the time he writes the Church is already divided. We may not exactly be in the days of denominationalism, but already by the second half of the first century there were congregations with different backgrounds and traditions. A story like this was surely intended by Mark to underline the need to value the work of others. To see God at work in all sorts of ways through all sorts of people. And not only to see that but to affirm it and rejoice in it. To rejoice in what was happening in the next town, even if it was being done by a church founded by Peter instead of Paul.  
  
The opposite is to try to ‘control it’. To long for a restrictive uniformity and to value only the work and witness done in my tradition and from my group.  
  
On Wednesday I attended a Retreat Association Trustees’ Meeting at the convent next to Euston Station. Gathered around the table that day were Anglicans, Catholics, Methodists and yes, even Baptists. We were not disappointed in each other – over the ten years I’ve been with this group it’s been inspiring to both recognise what we have in common and to value the individual distinctives we each bring to the table from our various traditions. No one would say in that group – oh, you’re a Catholic, what a shame!  
  
Maybe today we might even want to take this principle of seeing God at work in others a step further.   
  
A congregation like ours will have folks who serve at The Citizens Advice Bureau, volunteer in Samaritans, work with Good Companions and fundraise with Rotary. Is such involvement less worthy because it isn’t in a church? It isn’t being done by our ‘tribe’?  
  
I suspect that everyone who volunteers in this way is convinced that the good things that happen through these organisations – the life affirming wholeness that such organisations seek to bring, is full of God and of his love.  
  
Now, we are not yet finished with poor John this morning. This isn’t a very good day for him I’m afraid.  
  
It’s been pointed out that it’s John who comes up to Jesus in today’s passage and calls him Teacher. Rabbi. It’s a traditional greeting.  
  
I wonder how we can best honour our teachers? Isn’t it by listening to their teaching! But John seems to be in trouble here.  
  
He calls Jesus teacher, but he gives us the impression that the message hasn’t really sunk in.  
  
It’s John who will ask about who is first in the Kingdom of God even though Jesus spoke many times of the upside-down values of his kingdom. Jesus isn’t interested in top table tickets, but John is.   
  
Maybe the message was too radical. Perhaps the parables were too mysterious. Or was John just filtering out, like we all do, the challenging stuff and only hearing the easy bits?  
  
One commentator I read this week takes a swipe at the disciples and says at times they were the ‘epitome of myopia’ – they were short-sighted – at times they didn’t quite get it. Peter wants to box Jesus in using the language of Messiahship and John is concerned about prestige.   
  
But not only that. Isn’t it ironic that just a few chapters back Mark chronicles how the disciples couldn’t perform a miracle of exorcism? Someone complains to Jesus that his followers were falling down on the job. Yet here is John criticising others who could bring liberation to a possessed individual.   
  
It sort of feels like double standards.  
  
Of course we are used to Jesus coming down on the religious professionals of his day for their hypocrisy. Sometimes they would worship at the temple and call on God’s forgiveness only to walk out and be unrelenting in calling in a debt from a subsistence farmer who simply couldn’t pay.  
  
Yet here, in Mark 9, Jesus is frustrated that it’s one of his disciples who seems to be missing the point.

Yet we can all be myopic – short-sighted. Because if we ever use religion to promote power or be our mechanism for control, if we ever use faith as a way of bringing about exclusivity haven’t we too missed the point. Like John we can call Jesus ‘teacher’ but fail to understand the lesson.  
  
Maybe the art exhibition that we are privileged to have in the corridor currently can help us in our thinking. As we look at these paintings we’ll see love on the faces of the paramedics, a sense of vulnerability in that painting of a refugee family from Uganda, abstracts seeking to communicate the sheer joy of God’s presence. This exhibition is entitled the Healing Power of Christ – it’s about welcome, kindness, humility, integrity, wholeness and joy. Perhaps the paintings can be our teachers this week?  
  
I suspect, all of us can be like John or Peter. We can all miss the challenge or fail to see the essence of what Jesus said.   
  
The encouraging thing is that these failing disciples were a work in progress, just like us. And Jesus doesn’t give up on them. He keeps walking beside them. He keeps helping them to take further steps in understanding and leadership. And even if we are not the best students in the class, Jesus isn’t so much interested in sending us to detention as much as going through it all one more time with us after school!  
  
Our Psalm this morning, Psalm 19 which C S Lewis, by the way, called the greatest poem in the Psalter, talks of God’s law, God’s instruction and God’s teaching as something greater than gold and sweeter than honey.  
  
Now the next part of the sermon isn’t going to be comfortable – just thought I’d give you a heads up about that.  
  
That’s because this morning’s reading ends with these dramatic, almost outrageous warnings from Jesus directed to any who causes harm to the little ones.

Earlier in this chapter Mark describes that touching scene of Jesus taking the children into his arms and blessing them. At one time almost every Sunday School hall in the country had a picture of that moment on its walls.

So this reference to ‘little ones’ could literally mean children – a group that in Jesus’ days had few rights or protections.  
  
Yet by the time of the Markan church it might also mean those vulnerable adults in the congregation who needed to be cared for and looked after. And in that sense things are not that different today. All denominations now issue safeguarding guidelines aimed at protecting both children and vulnerable adults in local churches.

At its heart, these warnings are about how we use or misuse our power, influence and authority.

Buzzing around the disciples at this moment were issues of who should sit at the top table and the sort of Messiah Jesus might be. They had gone ‘off message’.   
  
So Jesus shocks them back on course. In one of his most outspoken moments he talks of cutting off your arm or foot and throwing it into the fire rather than that arm or foot leading you into sin.  
  
In first century speak a foot, for example, was a euphemism for a sexual part of the body. Throw it away, says today’s text, rather than keeping it and using it unwisely.  
  
In a sermon like this the elephant in the room is the sad fact that the Church has a tarnished record when it comes to the abuse of ‘little ones’. The statistics speak for themselves. The Holy See, between 2001 and 2010 investigated 3000 priests. The Church of England in 2016 revealed it was dealing with 3,300 complaints. The Baptist Union, in February of this year, concluded a trawl through 4,370 ministerial files, going back to the 1940’s,a trawl by independent safeguarding experts, to see if there were questions that needed answering and documented incidents that needed follow up.

So, this is the Jesus who rages in Mark 9. Not the gentle Jesus. The Jesus who uses hyperbole and the poetic imagery of fire and severed limbs, to make a stand for the vulnerable, for the little ones of any society, and their need for protection, respect and justice. Words that matter from a Jesus who cared passionately for the vulnerable.  
  
How, then, might we conclude our reflections on this week’s lectionary passage?  
  
One response would be to honour Jesus the teacher by listening more attentively to his lessons. The teaching of Jesus isn’t bland and sometimes further and deeper study reveals a Jesus who is so much more radical than the Sunday School stereotype we might have grown up with. Like John perhaps we all have some ‘un-learning’ to do because all of us can too easily massage the gospel with our prejudices. But what good is a watered-down version of the Sermon on the Mount or a glossed over interpretation of The Good Samaritan? Let Jesus be the teacher and honour him by truly listening to his lessons.

Secondly, doesn’t today’s passage throw up the challenge for us to live with kindness and respect for the vulnerable. A mark of our true spirituality and a test of the integrity of our discipleship is not just how often we attend church but how we live those other six days of the week.   
  
I love the fact that here at AFC we regularly go into three residential care homes and there, amongst folk who have become vulnerable, we lead a short act of worship. After the service I often see the volunteers from the church go around the circle and shake hands with the residents. It’s a moment of human contact and kindness – and usually those we are visiting express a word of gratitude.

Whether we are visiting a relative with dementia, caring for an elderly person at home, being a listening ear with someone who is struggling to make sense of life, or looking after children, keeping them safe in a stimulating environment – we are sharing the love of God and following the example of Jesus. And that’s worth remembering in a week when The Sycamore Club celebrates 40 years of service – 40 years of opening its doors to the vulnerable and seeking to offer a day once a week when wholeness, kindness and down to earth loving compassionate is shared.  
  
And thirdly, finally, my reaction to today’s text is a reaffirmation in my own mind that wherever love is experienced, God is there. Both inside and outside the Church God is active. John thought only those within the immediate circle of Jesus’ followers could do such work, yet Jesus rejoices wherever love is shared and wholeness is promoted.  
  
So, may such listening to Jesus and such service as modelled by Jesus who cared for the ‘little ones’ be a mark of our discipleship of this Christlike God, in the name of The Father, Son and Spirit. Amen.  
  
 *Ian Green, Amersham, 28th September 2018*