

“Upside-Down Values” – Mark 9:30-37 – Sept 23/12

Some of you will know that I am a Monty Python fan. For those of you not familiar with the name they were a comedy group in England – John Cleese and Eric Idle are two names that come immediately to mind – who produced several movies including *The Meaning of Life* and *Life of Brian*.

The comedy in these movies is often bizarre, edging on the outrageous, but underneath is a powerful understanding of people and the big issues we face. Their approach is highly irreverent – offensive to some – but captures the essence of life.

I can't help seeing the scenes in our gospel reading for today through a Monty Python lens. Shift your mind from a picture of beautiful water and coastal mountains to a dusty scene of travelers on foot along a Mediterranean road. There's Jesus walking in front of his group of students, talking away, apparently taking their silence as being totally absorbed listening, while in truth the silence was due to the gaggle of disciples having dropped behind so he wouldn't hear them arguing. But it's clear that Jesus and the disciples separated not merely by distance but by lack of understanding, as Mark affirms by declaring that “[the disciples] did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him”.

“And [they] were afraid to ask him.” Isn't that odd? Doesn't that declaration stand out in flashing neon lights?! I can't help wondering why they were afraid – after all, they certainly knew this teacher well by now. They'd spent a lot of time with him traveling all throughout the region. They'd heard him proclaim the good news of God's impending kingdom. They'd seen his tender compassion acted out in feeding crowds and healing individuals. They called him 'teacher', and asked him all kinds of questions. Why, then, were they afraid to ask him what he meant when he tried to tell 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.”? Were they afraid because they had seen him turn so savagely on Peter when he had tried to argue with him? Whatever their reasons, they were “afraid to ask him”.

What is clear is that they were absorbed in themselves and they weren't listening to Jesus, and he knew it. And so, just like a group of schoolboys caught passing notes at the back of the class, thinking the teacher didn't notice, the disciples were called up on the carpet by their teacher. Not in public this time, but once they had reached the house in Capernaum and were properly in private, Jesus confronts them about their behaviour. “What were you arguing about on the way?”, he demands of them, and then there follows another wondrous Monty Python moment as the disciples look down at their sandals idly drawing patterns on the floor. “Nothing! Nope, nope, nothing!” But the text tells us that no one answers, not even Peter who seems to have learned his lesson from the last time he stepped forward and got soundly rebuked. Not one of them dared answer, because they knew in their hearts that what they had indeed been arguing about would not please Jesus. For they had been arguing about status, about position, about prestige, about prominence, about who among them was the greatest. Who was the greatest? Who was the most right? Who was the smartest, the strongest, the one with the clearest vision of the kingdom? Who was the one among them who should call the shots, who understood the master the best and could thus claim the right to tell the others what to do? Who was the greatest among them, they argued, and as they were called to account for their actions by Jesus they could only hang their heads down in silent shame, because they knew they had wandered into an area and into a subject that would displease him.

It comes as no surprise that the practice of arguing about priority, about prestige and about who is the most important actually started within the church before the church was even

officially launched, because that argument has continued unabated over two thousand year and the arguments over who is the most important are still heard today. The struggle over which denomination has the greatest claim to authenticity and power is not quite as open today as it has been, but the age-old conflicts still run very close to the surface. Even within single denomination there are groupings and clusters of those who would argue that they are the most important. The battle cries over who is closer to God, and thus more important, still ring out: “We are more spiritual!”; “We pray more properly!”; “We read more scripture!”; “We are more refined!”; “We dress more properly!”; “We are more Scottish, or Korean, or whatever!” ... the list is endless. And of course the same is true of congregations, groups within congregations, right down to individuals arguing one-on-one just like the disciples on the way. And also just like the disciples when we are called by Jesus to account for what we are arguing about, we can only hang our heads in shame, knowing that our arguments not only pale in comparison to what Jesus is trying to teach us about his death and resurrection, but that our arguments are not and cannot be pleasing to Jesus.

The disciples didn’t have to respond to Jesus as he demanded of them what they were arguing about. Jesus knew them well, and what was in their hearts, and what they had been discussing and arguing about, and he reprimanded them this time in the most gentle of ways. He sat down and called them to gather around him. He didn’t climb on a chair or table so he could berate them from ‘on high’. He didn’t force them to sit down while he strode angrily among them, rebuking them from a posture and position of authority. Gently, as they gathered around him, he said, “listen, my children, whoever wants to be the most important must be the least important, and be the servant of all.” Jesus begin to draw for them the picture of the Son of Man, the Messiah, being the greatest through the greatest of sacrifices. To those who had the ears to hear, his lesson on the way about being betrayed and killed and rise again would start to make a bit of sense, but his was still a non-intuitive message; a message that goes against the grain of all that we believe. The disciples knew all too well, as do we, that the world operates in a different way. The world rewards strength, and capability, and those who are the greediest and the most grasping seem to always win the prize, gain the gold, come out on top. We know that those who stand back and let the others go first sometimes even miss the bus, or bump up against the ‘sold out’ sign. How could Jesus expect his disciples to understand, how could he expect us to understand?

How, indeed? First, to help the disciples understand, Jesus, the greatest of teachers, provided an example, taking a little child and telling them, “whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes not just me but the Father himself”. The lesson comes clear in the very weakness, powerlessness, innocence of the child. The most powerful thing we can do is to welcome, to accept, to honour God through welcoming and accepting others in Christ’s name. But there’s a second message in this example that the grace and mercy of our accepting of a powerless child echoes and reflects God accepting us in our weakness, our innocence, and sends a clear message that we should strive not to be the most powerful, but to be the least powerful, indeed even be the servant of all. As we accept others in Jesus’ name, not because they are “the greatest”, not because they are the most powerful, the most political, the most dramatically faithful, the most righteous, the cleanest, the best-living people of faith, as we accept, no as we welcome others who are fragile, weak, unlearned, incapable, but who believe with even the teensiest mustard-seed of faith in Jesus, we welcome both Jesus and God himself into our own lives. That child was a wondrous example of the upside-down, inside-out, not-as-the-world-rates

nature of God's grace, his mercy and forgiveness offered to us not in our strength and importance but in our weakness and frailty.

But the supreme example provided by Jesus was of course his demonstration that in his greatest of serving he was the greatest of all. By following the way to being betrayed by one of his own, by being arrested and killed in horrible and public suffering, and by rising again in victory over even death, Jesus lived the ultimate example of serving all, and in so doing demonstrated that he was and continues to be the greatest of all. Giving himself in total service to us, that we might receive and experience the love and mercy of God, offered freely in his grace, was the ultimate example of what Jesus tried to teach his disciples, and us, about those who would be first having to be the last of all and servant of all.

In spite of Jesus' lesson, and even in spite of his supreme example, it is a difficult lesson to learn, as we can see from the history of the church. But there is hope, because the lesson was heard and learned, although not always perfectly. The disciples eventually did understand what Jesus was trying to teach them, and they followed him in service to their own painful, self-sacrificing ends. Countless people of faith throughout the ages have heard this message, and have welcomed children of all ages in the name of Jesus. Each one of us here has been so welcomed at least once by someone in the faith, or we wouldn't be here. Some of us I'm sure can even remember with great fondness some key individual in the Christian faith who welcomed us in such a way as we heard the grace of God at work in them in the name of Jesus, and we really knew for the first time that they loved us, and God loved us too.

That's the image, the picture, I'd like you to take away with you today. Not the image of Jesus trudging along the way with a gaggle of arguing disciples behind him (as fun as that image is!). Not even the image of Jesus sitting, with the chastised disciples standing around and a child at his side, although if that were the only image you retained from today that would be OK too. But if you could instead take away from here the image of that key person who welcomed you like an innocent child in Christ's name, the image of that key person who first helped you understand just how completely God loves you, you would take an image of Jesus' message of redefined power being put into practice. Keep that image refreshed in your mind, so that the next time you encounter an innocent child of nine months or ninety years seeking to find grace and peace you can redefine the image, putting yourself into the picture and welcoming them in Christ's name. In that way they too can know and understand they are loved by you, and by God, in Christ.