

HOPE FOR HARD-HEARTED PEOPLE

Wisdom 1. 16 – 2.1, 12-22

James 3. 13 – 4. 3, 7-8a

Mark 9. 30-37

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

In today's appointed gospel reading, we have two stories that are told back-to-back; and I would like to make two connections between them.

The first story: our Lord is on the road with his disciples, and he wants to be alone with them. While he is alone with his disciples, Jesus predicts that he will be killed, and that he will rise on the third day. The disciples do not understand, and they are afraid to ask him what he means. They are ignorant and fearful.

The second story: having arrived at the town of Capernaum, Christ and his disciples are in a house (we are not told which one). Our Lord reveals that he is aware that the disciples were disputing among themselves during their walk. They are ashamed to admit it, but St Mark tells us they had been arguing about who was the greatest. After his question to them (and their silence), Jesus sits down and teaches them with authority. If any man desires to be first, he says, that person will need to be last of all, and servant of all. Then Christ takes a child in his arms, and proclaims that anyone who receives a child such as this one in our Lord's name, receives Jesus; and, receiving Jesus, receives also the Father who has sent Jesus.

First story, on the road; second story, in a house. On the road, a prediction of Christ's death and resurrection, received with silence. In the house, a teaching about precedence and humility, received with silence, and illustrated by a sitting Lord embracing a standing child.

Now, to make two connections.

In both stories, Jesus knows what is going on. He knows, firstly, what will happen to him in the future; and he needs to share this knowledge privately with his disciples. He therefore takes a walk with them without letting others know of it. The disciples need to know what will happen, so that they will continue to believe in Christ even after his shameful and humiliating death. Our Lord is showing care for his disciples in preparing them. He is also laying the groundwork for their future faith in him. For when Jesus on the cross is shamed before the world, they will know that *he knew* this was to happen, and thus Christ rises above the shame.

Our Lord also knows what is going on with his disciples. Even when they discuss matters amongst themselves apart from Jesus, he knows what they say and think. In their private circle, the disciples are discussing (that is, arguing about) who is, or who will be, or who should be the greatest. They are focussed on being the greatest. Christ knows what is in their hearts and he knows what is wrong with their hearts. Just as the disciples have not previously understood (even though our Lord told them) that he is going to suffer and die, so they have not yet understood (even though Jesus has shown them) that he has turned the notion of ‘what it means to be great’ upside down.

So this is the first connection between the two stories: Christ knows what is going on.

Secondly, what is going on is the deep cruelty of the human heart. On the road, when our Lord again predicts his passion, this time he says: ‘The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands. He does not say, into the hands of the priests and scribes and Pharisees. Nor does he say, into the hands of the political authorities. He just says ‘into human hands’. He calls himself the Son of Man and it is into the

hands of men that he is to be delivered. These hands of men into which the Son of Man is to be delivered are not qualified further. They are simply *human hands*.

And I think that it just might be possible that the disciples do not understand, and are speechless and fearful, because they have caught the hint that the hands that will do Jesus in, being human hands, might be *their hands*. We know, of course, that one of them ultimately will do Jesus in. But we also know that, at that last supper, every one of them will turn to Christ and ask, 'Is it I, Lord?' Just as Christ here predicts his passion, so he prefigures the possibility that any human hands at all could have done him in. It could have been Peter. Or James. Or Mary Magdalene. Or Mark, who is writing this gospel. Or me. Or you. Our Lord says that he will be delivered into human hands.

And what those human hands will do is kill him. He repeats it; it is emphasised in the text: '*they will kill him; and three days after being killed*' . . . Human hands are cruel hands.

Let us now connect this unveiling of human cruelty in the first scene with Jesus's embrace of the child in the second. The disciples, servant-like, are standing, which was the position of subservience in the ancient world; and Christ is sitting, the ancient position of authority. Sitting, he summons a child to come and stand in the midst of the disciples. And then he takes the child into his arms. Embracing the child, our Lord does not need to stand; Jesus sitting and the child standing are on a level with each other. They are equal. And yet Christ, although seated, is in authority. He is the great one; and the child who is standing is subservient to the sitting one who is great.

This is a picture of the kingdom of heaven. It is not a sentimental picture about children, their cuteness, their innocence or some other nonsense. It is a dynamic

picture of the *change that happens to greatness* in the kingdom of heaven. Through his embrace, our Lord identifies himself with the child, with the one who stands, that is with the servant. And so Jesus is on both sides of the embrace. He is the great one who sits with authority; and he is also the meek and voiceless one who stands and serves.

It is, I think, just possible that the disciples are silent as they witness all this because hope is coming upon them. They are hoping that they too can be on both sides of this embrace.

True human greatness happens when people, one after another, humble themselves to serve the other. On some occasions, the disciples will receive Christ's service, as he humbles himself before them (picture, for example the foot-washing at the last supper: our Lord stands, and he girds himself with a towel). On other occasions, the disciples will humble themselves and receive other humbled people, such as this child. In receiving them, they will receive not only Jesus, but also the Father who sent Jesus.

In the first story, on the road, the human heart is hard, and the human hands are cruel, killing Christ. In the second story, in the house, the human heart (of our Lord) is supple and alive, and his human hands embrace the standing servant.

What, in sum, shall we say about today's gospel passage, with its two parts and its interconnections? Firstly, that Jesus knows everything; and that means that he knows our hearts. We cannot hide our hearts from Christ. On the one hand, we are very much capable of having hard hearts. We cannot be honest Christians without recognising the times when we have (figuratively at least) betrayed our Lord and disappointed him.

Yet, on the other hand, the one who was killed has made it possible for our hearts to be supple and alive. He has made it possible for us to embrace the child, which is to enter into the greatness of heaven, where one serves others and in so doing is served by Christ.

It's that old choice once again, that ancient existential question: will we persist in having a hard heart? What can we do? Once again: we can ask God to soften our hearts, and we can give ourselves to others.

Amen.