

Sermon for Sunday 19th September 2021 (Trinity 16) “What if?” from Fr. Mike.

- Proverbs 31.10–31; Psalm 1; James 3.13 – 4.3, 7–8a ; **Mark 9. 30–37**

In today’s Gospel, Jesus foretells his resurrection, chastises his disciples for arguing about who was the greatest among them, and points to a child as a model for discipleship. Every text is a sandwich, with something before it and something after it. Today we have the filling between two exorcisms. In the text before this, the disciples tried to exorcise a demon from a boy but failed, apparently because they didn’t pray (9:28–29). Jesus chastises them in harsh terms “How much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you?” (9:19). In the text that follows this, the disciples come to Jesus complaining that they had seen a man casting out demons in Jesus’ name. They whine to Jesus “We tried to stop him because he was not following us” (9:38). We didn’t give him permission; he didn’t have the right credentials, so how could he be a channel of healing?

“What if?”

Between Peter’s confession (in 8:29) and today’s story, Jesus has been busy. He has been transfigured on a mountain before Peter, James and John (9:2–8) and he has healed a boy with a spirit when his disciples could not (9:14–29).

Two “What if?” questions come to my mind when I look at this story in the context of what comes directly before it.

1. What if the disciples had prayed before they tried to exorcise the spirit from the boy? (8:14-29)

2. What if they had not been afraid to ask Jesus when they did not understand his prediction of his suffering and death? (9:32)

1. What if the disciples had prayed before they tried to exorcise the spirit from the boy?

Would they have been able to be channels of divine healing and experience peace and joy? Would their spiritual understanding have increased? I don't know. I only know what the text reveals: that their failure to pray is followed by their failure to understand Jesus' prediction of his suffering and death (9:30-32). This, after Jesus' promise that “to you has been given the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven” (Mark 4:11). Failure to pray is followed by failure to understand something Jesus has promised them they have access to. *“But they understood not that saying, and were afraid to ask him”* (9:32).

2. What if they had not been afraid to ask him?

I suspect they were afraid to ask him because their priority was how they

would look to each other if they did not understand. I became afraid to ask questions in mathematics lessons at school. I lacked aptitude. I tried, but it did not come easily, or really, at all. I remember the feeling of just not understanding something, of feeling like everyone else was getting it, and I was the only one who did not. I felt stupid and frustrated. There was a brief moment of enthusiasm (by the arrival of a new teacher) but after about my second question, he got an annoyed look on his face. I stopped asking and just muddled through with an anxious mind, memorising formulas rather than understanding their derivations, grateful just to get through to the end of the year. Why did I become afraid to ask? Because I didn't want to look stupid in front of the teacher and my classmates. I didn't want to risk public chastisement or ridicule. Apparently, my fear of how I would look in others' eyes was stronger than my desire to understand the mysteries of mathematics.

What if the disciples hadn't been afraid to ask? Sometimes I think the Jesus of the Gospel of Mark is a little tough on the disciples. They are probably, like us, doing the best they can. He's tough, but is he *really* the kind of teacher who would meet a sincere desire for understanding with annoyance and dismissal? Do we really need to be afraid to ask Jesus to

help us follow him, understand to the limits of our human wisdom, and trust where it leaves off?

Throughout Mark's Gospel, the disciples remain at about the same low level of understanding, or complete lack thereof. It was partly because they were simply afraid to ask, and partly because their burning question was not, "How can I better understand and live out Jesus' identity and mission?", but rather, "*How can I be the greatest?*"

What if lack of *prayer* led to lack of understanding and fear of asking for help? We may not understand the mystery of prayer, what it does and how it does it, but we all know what happens when we *don't* pray. We all know that not praying leads to a cycle of scattered thoughts, bad decisions and actions we later regret. This seems to be what happened to the disciples in this gospel passage. Earlier (8:27-38) we see how Peter's rebuke instigated Jesus' teaching about the way of the cross. Here again, the disciples' mistaken priorities trigger a clear teaching from Jesus. This time it is about who is greatest. It seems to me that the disciples' argument has four roots:

- **fear** that they have fallen in Jesus' estimation (9:19)
- **insecurity** at their failure to heal the boy (9:29)
- **resentment** toward one another as Jesus chastises them
- **eagerness** to compete, in order to regain his approval

As you can see, the first letter of each of the above negative responses spells out **f-i-r-e**. The disciples could not get past their heated thoughts which prevented their understanding of what Jesus was trying to tell them. Their disappointing focus on their personal reputations, a priority each of them held inside, comes to the surface in an argument over who was the greatest. It turns out that to be great is not to impress crowds with displays of healing, or to try to become the teacher's pet of a special Teacher who refuses to play favourites. It turns out that true 'greatness' is to be focused on something quite other than oneself. It turns out that greatness lies in welcoming one who is not viewed as great by the culture – the child, the one who is beyond the circle, or who needs a welcome. This point is expanded when John tells Jesus they tried to stop a man who was casting out demons in His name because he was not known to them. Jesus explains that the very fact **the man had enough faith to call on His name proves he is not an outsider to the kingdom**, even if the disciples don't recognise him. So here is the final "What if?" question. What if we actually did all that Jesus asks of us? Imagine what our world would look like then ...

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