

September 20, 2015

"Mirror Mirror..."

Mark 9:30-37

A little boy went to a new church with his parents one Sunday. The parents went in to worship, the boy into Sunday School.

During the lesson, his Sunday School teacher kept talking about how important it was for children to grow up in a Christian home. This was emphasized over and over again.

We are all God's people.
Here, we all belong.
May this morning be a time
of compassion, community
and hope.

The little boy became agitated and after the lesson immediately ran to his parents and said he wanted to leave right away. Thinking something had happened the parents left and on the drive home asked their son what was the matter. The little boy said "At that church they say that every child has to live in a Christian home and that means I wouldn't be able to live with you guys anymore".

Sometimes we divide ourselves and others into good Christians and not so good Christians. We think of ourselves as good Christians when we go to church, study the Bible, treat people fairly, pay our taxes, and work in the community and so on. But today's reading from Mark suggests that following Jesus is a lot harder than we might think. The question may be not so much whether or not we are "good Christians" but rather how can we support each other in the very difficult calling of following Jesus on the way.

Mark tells the story of Jesus and his disciples travelling and the disciples arguing who was the greatest among them. Jesus interrupts them to ask what they were talking about. They were too embarrassed to tell him. Mark then records Jesus saying "The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of people, and they will kill Him. And after He is killed, He will rise on the third day."

The disciples did not, could not or would not understand. Their idea of who Jesus would be was so different – a Messiah who would come in the power of God to overthrow the Roman occupation and usher in a period of peace and tranquility similar to the time of King David. But here Jesus is talking about suffering, death, resurrection. It makes no sense.

To complicate things further, for the disciples and for us, is Mark's use of the term "Son of Man". It appears several times in the gospel and clearly refers to Jesus, but Jesus never says "I am the Son of Man." Recent scholarship and study of this phrase indicates that it simply and literally means "a human being". The Son of Man is a human being. Is there a sense that all human beings share in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Is there a deep connection between all human beings and the God we as Christians sense and experience in the person of Jesus Christ?. Is there a deep connection that we miss in our Western thought process which focuses so much on radical individuality?

The philosopher, Rene Descartes, expressed and promoted this radical individuality in his well known phrase, "I think, therefore I am". But is there a different way of looking at ourselves. In our essence are we as individualistic as we think?

Jesus follows up this conversation with his disciples by saying "Whoever welcomes a child like this in My name welcomes Me; and whoever welcomes Me is welcoming not Me, but the One who sent me". Is Mark, the gospel writer, trying to help us to see a different reality in terms of our "individualism"? To welcome a child, is to welcome Jesus, to welcome Jesus is to welcome God.

In South Africa, among the Zulu nation and in the Bantu language there is word "ubuntu". There is no easy way to translate it into English. Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu and others define it as "I am because we are". Nelson Mandela defined it as follows: "A person is a person through other people". This is a radically different way of identifying ourselves. Instead of being 'individuals' in the western way of thinking, our individuality and personhood is tied up in our relationship with others. We are who we are through our relationships with others. There is a strong connection between all human beings; stronger and more vital than we in the Western world have been taught. Is this strong connection what Mark the gospel writer is trying to teach us in this story? Is this strong connection what Jesus is trying to teach his disciples?

If so, a second way of looking at the text might be as follows: "Human beings will be delivered into the hands of people, and they will kill fellow human beings. And after they are killed, they will rise on the third day"

This second way does not exclude the traditional way of looking at the passage. It seems clear that Mark was referring to Jesus when he used the phrase "The Son of Man". But was Mark also using the phrase "Son of Man" as a play on words? Did he also mean it to say "human beings"? If so Mark may be showing us how difficult it is to truly follow Jesus - because to follow Jesus is to experience suffering and death followed by resurrection. Following Jesus means that the suffering of other human beings is our suffering as well, and our suffering is the suffering of all humankind.

We are all afraid to suffer, not only us, but the disciples too. Yet Jesus invites us to share in this suffering with an incredible word of hope at the end. Suffering and pain are followed by resurrection.

So conversations about whether we are good Christians are totally out of place. Just like the disciples who were arguing about who was the greatest among them. It is hard to be a follower of Jesus. Following Jesus calls for transformation offered by God.

So instead of "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest or greatest of them all" – something we all buy into at times – we might instead say, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, the "Son of Man", leader of us all calls us to follow on the Way. How do we support each other in that endeavour today?"

We are all connected! Thanks be to God.