23 September 2018: Choral Eucharist

The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

Jeremiah 11: 18–20, Psalm 54, James 3: 13 – 4: 3,7–8a, Mark 9: 30–37

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+ Jesus was teaching his disciples saying to 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.’
(Mark 9: 31)

Our gospel reading this morning appears to fall into two quite discrete parts, each of which readily supplies sufficient material for a sermon in its own right. The familiar words towards the end, recounting how Jesus took a child in his arms and told the disciples that in receiving such a one they would receive him, opens the possibility of contemplating the innocence of childhood. Now that the Cathedral choir has returned in such good voice from its summer vacation, the angelic and attentive faces of the choristers could serve as useful visual aids to our reflections about what it means to welcome the pure and undefiled in our midst. We might think about our Lord’s incarnation as a defenceless baby, and bring to mind some of our favourite Christmas carols – the very ones that the choristers will be rehearsing all too soon. And, having thus domesticated Jesus’ message to us, we could prepare ourselves to move towards the liturgy of the sacrament in the warm glow of reminiscence about familiar and comforting truths.

That’s not what I am going to do this morning. Partly because, in the immediate aftermath of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, it is not easy for any clergy to talk with integrity about childhood innocence. But also, because I am confident we should not read this gospel as reflecting the adult Jesus – who at this point in the narrative of Mark’s gospel, was set on his way towards Jerusalem and the cross – as gentle, meek and mild. This passage, like the one we heard last week, provides us with one of Jesus’ hard teachings, addressing the Markan community’s struggle to understand who Jesus is and just what his life (and death, and resurrection) mean for believers in their own lives. Neither should we pull the lection apart and think only about either
Jesus’ prophecies of his own fate, or about his lesson in humility and servant leadership to his disciples, who wrangled so inappropriately about their own status. We need to read the passage entire and see how the two portions relate to one another. We should also recall what had happened immediately before this in Mark’s account.

Last week, we heard Jesus’ question to the disciples – ‘Who do you say that I am?’ – and Peter’s brave response: ‘the Messiah’. After that episode, Mark recounted the Transfiguration – the moment when Peter, James and John saw Jesus with Elijah and Moses. When that group descended from the mountain, he told of the failure of the other disciples to cure the demoniac boy and Jesus’ intervention in their stead. It was from there that Jesus and the disciples went into Galilee; Jesus chose deliberately to separate his own followers from the crowd who had witnessed his cure of the boy, in order that he could teach them. Not least because what he had to teach was so hard: ‘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,’ he said. But the disciples did not understand.

We may sympathise. In the immediate context of Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah, and of the sight given to him and two others of the transfigured Christ in conversation with the Law and the Prophets as personified by Moses and Elijah, it is obvious why the disciples could not grasp what Jesus was trying to tell them. It is equally clear that they were too scared to ask him to explain what he meant. There are other places in Mark’s gospel where Jesus spoke about the scandal of the cross, predicting his impending suffering, death and resurrection. We heard one of those passages in last week’s gospel (8: 31ff; cf. 10: 32-34), yet on each occasion the disciples failed to understand what he meant.

Various ways of interpreting the disciples’ repeated failures over this teaching present themselves. We might reflect on how different God’s ways are from our ways, his thoughts from our thoughts, as Isaiah reminds us (Is 55: 8-9). In that light, we can have no difficulty in grasping the disciples’ incomprehension: we would have shared it, had we been there. Or we could consider Calvin’s view that the corrupting power of sin prevented the disciples from comprehending Jesus’ clear and unambiguous pronouncement. Calvin argued that the veil of foolish imagination so darkened the disciples’ vision that they could not see the truth of the one who stood in front of them (Calvin, On harmony of the gospels, Matt: 17.22). It’s not hard to apply that to our own situations, also.
Alternatively, bearing in mind that this passage comes so soon after Peter’s recognition of Jesus as the Messiah, we might wonder whether the disciples were struggling with the same confusion that afflicted some early Christians: what was the relationship between the God of the Hebrew Scriptures and the God of Jesus Christ? How could they reconcile their own expectations (based on their knowledge of Jewish teachings) of the sort of Messiah who would redeem Israel with Jesus’ insistence that he would suffer and die? Surely such a fate could not be reconciled with Israelite notions of a victorious and redeeming Messiah?

We find the most articulate expression of this sort of confusion in the writings of Marcion, a second-century Christian, who would be condemned as a heretic for arguing that Jesus’ teachings were incompatible with the actions of the Old Testament God. Marcion argued for a complete discontinuity between Yahweh, the judging God of the Law, and Jesus’ God of love, who promised the forgiveness of sins. Arguing against Marcion, the Latin theologian Tertullian used the Hebrew Scriptures to demonstrate not only the unity of the one God, creator and redeemer, but also the extent to which the sufferings of the Messiah were foretold in the Old Testament. One of the passages that Tertullian used to refute Marcion was the extract we heard from Jeremiah, its prophecy about ‘the lamb brought to the slaughter’, and the threat to destroy the tree with its fruit, both of which he equated with Jesus. (Against Marcion, III. 19, IV. 40). For the disciples, who knew Jesus during his earthly ministry, the discontinuity between their Messianic expectations and Jesus’ teachings must have felt irreconcilable, and thus extremely frightening.

Mark often contrasted faith with fear in his gospel, for example when Jesus asked the disciples after he had stilled the storm: “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” (Mark 4: 40). Or when, as he restored Jairus’ daughter, Jesus told the distraught father (who had just learnt that his daughter was dead), “Do not fear, only believe” (Mark 5: 36). Jesus saw the disciples’ fear as paralysing their minds, preventing them from understanding properly. And out of that inhibiting fear, they couldn’t ask him what he meant by his prophetic statements about his fate for all the same sorts of reasons that we often hesitate to ask questions: because doing so might make them look stupid; or unfaithful; or it might incur Jesus’ anger. But what Jesus tries to show them is that doubt is not the opposite of faith; rather, fear is. True faith grows best in a climate that allows for asking questions and expressing uncertainty. If faith is ‘the assurance of things hoped for, the
conviction of things not seen’ (Heb. 11: 1), doubt is an essential ingredient. But fear paralyses, shutting down rational thought and preventing further enquiry.

Of course, what Jesus told them was frightening. No one anticipated Jesus’ cross, any more than they did his resurrection. Both events left all who witnessed them perplexed and doubting. The very fact that Jesus should speak of his own death in terms of defeat, pain and ignominy was completely terrifying. The disciples thought that he was the Messiah; they had pinned all their hopes on him. In their imaginings, it wasn’t supposed to end like this.

For all of us, giving up our preconceived ideas about what constitutes victory, value and achievement generates fear. The things of the world that we are conditioned to value—money, status, prestige—are not the things that God would have us value. We need to turn our backs on precisely those aspirations for which we have worked, on which we have set our hearts. Only then can we honestly seek to take up our cross and follow Christ.

Yes, this gospel passage, like last week’s, contains one of Jesus’ hard sayings. But there is hope in this story, for Jesus’ love is not thwarted by our fear. This was the second time that he predicted his own death to his disciples. But even though fear (and confused Messianic expectations) stopped them from engaging with him and hearing what he said, that did not prevent Jesus from having compassion on them. Nor did it make him stop teaching them. He went on repeating this hard message, keeping faith even when they could not. Our prayer needs to be that we may learn to set aside all those things that keep us focused on the world and separate us from the love of God, the God who knows us and calls us each by name.

Almighty Father, our teacher and guide,
ignoring our doubts, you call us to yourself
and welcome us as your beloved children.
Help us to lay aside our greed and selfish ambition
that we may walk in your ways of wisdom and understanding
as servants of your peace. Amen