

Christ the King, Claremont

Seventeenth Sunday of Pentecost  
19<sup>th</sup> September 2021

Liturgy of the Word, Mark 9:30-37

## **Servant-Based Discipleship**

by

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### **The Collect**

Lord Jesus Christ,  
you turn everything upside down  
and make all things new:  
pour your wisdom into our hearts  
that we will turn from selfish ambition  
to walk in your ways of mercy and peace;  
for you live and reign with the Father  
and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.  
Amen

### **Readings**

Proverbs 31:10-31  
Psalm 1  
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a  
Mark 9:30-37

## **Servant-Based Discipleship**

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he 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." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arm, he said to them. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me (Mark 9:30-37).

Like the intriguing question concerning Jesus' identity at Caesarea Philippi, this teaching was so difficult and hard for the disciples to apprehend, for this was not the way the world of the day functioned. In their dominant worldview, like ours today, prominence and social ranking were models that made the world possible.

Messiahs were not only divinely sanctioned; they were also believed to rule forever and were naturally, socially, and religiously powerful. Hence, as a messiah, Jesus' prediction of his suffering and death on the cross was not only intriguing but also shattering and contrary to the disciples' held beliefs. Indeed, this new teaching took the disciples well beyond their conceived understanding of what being a messiah entailed, hence equally consequential to the need for a new reinterpretation of discipleship.

As our collect today suggests, we cannot get to the point of Jesus' message or to the bottom of his teaching unless we are willing to redefine or turn our preconceived moral beliefs and worldviews upside down. But how do we turn our centred beliefs upside down, without missing the centrality of Jesus' message?

In today's gospel, verses 30-37 are rich in a diversity of options that may help us get to the bottom of Jesus' teaching but make it difficult to select one among the options.

On their way to Jerusalem, Jesus anticipates his passion, death, and resurrection, but as usual, the disciples fail to understand and are caught instead in the squabble for power. Yet, Jesus brings up a child, places it in their middle, he takes it up in his arm and begins to expound the model of discipleship and power the disciples should aspire to: still the disciples fail to capture the irony behind Jesus' teaching and what he tries to bring to the fore—humility and servanthood over prominence, as marks of true discipleship.

In this text, it is puzzling to select between different options which sermon would most appropriately strengthen the faith of the faithful. So, while I will refer to all others, I will focus on the idea of childhood as a model for discipleship. One practical implication for my focus is that in the society of Jesus' day children were right at the bottom of the social ladder and being a child was equivalent to being nobody. So those who were willing to be part of Jesus' ministry were equally expected to embrace nobodies in the social ladder and to see themselves as nobodies. Albert Nolan, South African Catholic priest and theologian, member of the Dominican Order in South Africa, remarks in his brief manuscript, *Jesus today, a spirituality of radical freedom*<sup>1</sup>, that:

Of all the things Jesus turned upside down, none was more surprising and unexpected than his depiction of a little child instead of an adult as the model we should imitate and learn from. The image of true greatness that he put before his disciples and lived up to himself was the image of a little child. For Jesus personal transformation means becoming like a child.<sup>2</sup>

Albert Nolan gives us the vocabulary we need to speak about childhood as a model for Christian discipleship. In his manuscript, Nolan dedicates part of his time to reflect on Jesus' claim of infants as a model of discipleship. Nolan sees children's ability to contemplate wonder in everything as one of the greatest qualities of childhood. For Nolan "one of the most remarkable qualities of a child is a sense of wonder. For children "everything is new and surprising." For children who have not been deprived of their childhood in one way or the other, life is magical, and everything is a miracle.<sup>3</sup> For Nolan, as we grow and become part of the social tide, our capacity to wonder becomes obsolete, fear and arrogance take over. As we learn to cope with the practical demands of the world we live in, we generally lose our sense of wonder, suspicion and mistrust take over. We begin to take everything in life for granted. Instrumental thinking takes over and we become practical and pragmatic, we cease to receive without interrogating.<sup>4</sup>

I can still relate to what Nolan is saying. As a child, I experienced a sense of wonder. How I miss my childhood, particularly when I used to travel by bus with my mother. As we travelled, trees and the immaculate landscape would move in an apparently opposite direction, in a spectacularly amazing guise, as the bus moved forward. It was a thrilling and mind-blowing experience, to be found no longer. Now, beyond the horizons and wonders of childhood, what I have come to experience is that trees move no longer, they stand idle no matter how speedy the bus might be! Trees no longer ran; they remain firmly planted. My adulthood and a longing sense for certainty and uprightness have taken over the sense of wonder which life in childhood provided. My childhood ability to wonder provided me with a momentum for happiness and joy. In fact, as I grew, while discounting some minor

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<sup>1</sup>Nolan, Albert: *Jesus Today, A Spirituality of Radical Freedom*. Orbis Books, New York 2008

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit., p. 119

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit., p. 122

<sup>4</sup> Op. cit., p. 122

frustrations and fears, one of the most remarkable and thrilling of experiences in my life are those I came to encounter during the early years of my infancy. During my childhood, life was a wonder, life was really wonderful. As adults, we suspect everything and anything. As we grow older, we gradually fail in fascination. Life becomes less fascinating. Gradually our sense of wonder seems to take us nowhere anymore. Our sense of wonder is no longer useful in providing guidance to life's predicaments and dilemmas that our modern society always entails. But for Nolan, when we fail in wonder, we also cease to embrace the life that is worth living. For Nolan, Jesus must surely have noticed that children have an unspoiled sense of wonder. This must have been one of the things Jesus loved about children, their fascination with all of life.<sup>5</sup>

As Nolan reminds us, reading between the lines of the gospels it seems abundantly clear that Jesus had a deep sense of wonder. "He was enthralled by the beauty of lilies of the field, whose splendour, he felt, far surpassed that of King Solomon in all his regalia (Mt 6:28-29). He marvelled at the birds of the air that find food without having to sow and reap and store in barns (Mt 6:26)."<sup>6</sup> Still, "[h]e noticed the miracle of wheat that grows quickly and invisibly while the farmer sleeps. 'The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head' (Mark 4:28)." For Nolan, in all these marvels and wonders of nature, Jesus saw the mysterious hand of God. He was a mystic and a poet.<sup>7</sup> As a repository of wonder, as Nolan puts it, Jesus was not an apocalyptic dreamer. He was a prophet with a prophetic message to the people of his time. He spoke about things that God had not revealed to the learned and the wise but to mere children (Luke 10:21).<sup>8</sup>

Jesus had the capacity to relate simple stories or parables about everyday life, in a way that did not give visionary accounts of the heavenly world like the learned and the wise. "He refused to speak about signs from heaven and drew attention to the signs on earth, the signs of the time (Mark 8:11-13)."<sup>9</sup> Without adopting a sense of wonder, it would have been almost impossible for a Roman Centurion, a Roman officer of a high rank, to put his faith, humbly, in an itinerant Jewish preacher. The culture and politics of supremacy would have ruled out contact, let alone this act of faith and homage. His act of faith, so unexpected and against the culture, was a gift. It made a huge impression on Jesus. Do we find ourselves at times, weak in faith, discouraged by the atmosphere and culture around us that no longer provide us with the leisure for wonder? What about the gift that the centurion got? Are we open to receive it?

Without adopting a sense of wonder it would have remained very difficult or even impossible for the disciples to find a space in their hearts to accommodate Jesus' crucial revelation of himself and the kind of a Messiah he was. Yes, the disciples failed to understand this specific teaching at the heart of the incarnation, for how could God allow his Son to suffer and die? They failed to comprehend Jesus' teaching and destiny, but their sense of wonder assisted them in keeping up with Jesus despite their failures and frustrations.

They failed to capture the wonder of resurrection in the midst of tragedy that Jesus' message tried to reveal but Jesus never abandoned them. Their minds remained caught on the certainty of suffering and death and failed to capture the mystery of the resurrection which was more prominent in Jesus' teaching, but Jesus remained their master and saviour. The disciples struggled in finding answers to what kind of a God would allow himself to be driven

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<sup>5</sup> Op. cit., p. 122

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit., p. 122

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit., p. 122

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit., p. 122

<sup>9</sup>Nolan, Albert: *God in South Africa. The Challenge of the Gospel*. David Philip, Cape Town 1988, p. 124

to calvary and suffer in that way. They longed for a powerful God who would conquer enemies, who would always stand and fight on their behalf, hence the idea of a powerless Messiah was farfetched. They hoped for an Almighty God, a conquering God, not the one who would suffer and die into human hands.

A sense of wonder should abate our fears and gives us the courage we need to ask questions on issues whose answers are difficult to find. In the same way that early Christians sought for different spiritualities to find answers to who Jesus really is, theology as faith seeking understanding should equally assist us in engaging with problems for which the pulpit cannot at times provide definite answers, including the questions concerning the Covid-19 pandemic.

So as Jesus continues to teach his disciples by referring to children as a model of discipleship, he is also asking all of us whether we are willing to become like children in order to receive him. A sense of wonder should help us to transcend the predicaments of our time.

Amen