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Liturgy of the Word, Mark 9:38-50, Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost, 25<sup>th</sup> September 2021

Mark 9:38-50

by

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**Collect**

Mysterious God:  
 reveal the narrowness our blinded  
 sight,  
 and make us aware of all who serve your  
 purposes  
 so that together we will celebrate the  
 glory of your reign;  
 through Jesus Christ our Lord,

lives and reigns with you  
 and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever  
 and ever. Amen

**Readings**

Ester 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22  
 Psalm 124  
 James 5:13-20  
 Mark 9:38-50

**Liturgy of the Word, Mark 9:38-50, Where Life is Lost, Life is Found**

The present story takes shape as Jesus heads toward Jerusalem. The way to Jerusalem is riddled with countless dangers and uncertainties that require not only strength and courage but also a new vision and understanding of who Jesus is, of who is this Jesus who leads the way. As Mark sets the story, since Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah at Caesarea Philippi, "Jesus struggles in reorienting the disciples' thoughts from human thoughts to God's thoughts." At Caesarea Philippi when Jesus confronted his disciples concerning his own identity, Peter tried to stand on behalf of his friend, to protect them from dangers uncertainties ahead, but Jesus asked him to get behind, cautioning him of the attempts to try to apprehend the divine from the human lens. Throughout Mark's gospel, the disciples remain humanly blind and clueless on what the way to Jerusalem entails as well as on the implications involved in following this Messiah. While the readers of Mark's gospel, including the outsiders in the story, are able to capture who Jesus is, the disciples as part of the story face immense difficulties in discerning who Jesus really is and where is leading them. When the disciples sidestep and squabble for power, arguing among themselves about who is greatest, Jesus intervenes by calling them to welcome children, setting children as models for discipleship. Today's gospel picks up where Jesus held a toddler in his arms making it a model to be followed as a clue to true discipleship, going even harsher in warning those who might set a stumbling block on the little ones as a repository of divine grace. As such, today's message is replete with imagery bordering on the complexities of Christian discipleship and the nuances it takes to discern the realm of heaven. By holding a toddler in his arms as a clue to the realm of heaven, Jesus reaffirms the gift of humility as a recipe for Christian discipleship. After asserting children as models of discipleship, and the disciples'

fears and squabbles for power on the way, Jesus comes down quite strongly on the disciples' vainglory. The imageries are quite scary, the call to cut off one's hand, checkout one's eye, and foot is hard to apprehend. The last two verses are somewhat difficult and heavy to keep abreast, indeed, for they make it clear that 'part that is incurably wounded must be cut off, lest the parts that are sound be corrupt. Where life is lost, life is found.

### **The need to get behind: humility based-obedience in Christian discipleship**

What are we to make of a gospel whose Saviour urges his disciples to get behind him in order to follow? There can be different interpretations in the present message, but none should be regarded as more important than the other. One intriguing irony in the gospel of Mark is the fact that despite many episodes Jesus tried to bring forth as a manifestation of divine glory, as a wellspring of messianic disclosure, the disciples remain completely obtuse and clueless on Jesus' identity and the nature of ministry has been committed to fulfilling. The disciples still pay less attention to why their master could have prompt Peter harshly to remain behind when Peter tried to get forward at Caesarea Philippi, warning Peter to get behind him in order to follow. Even on the way to Jerusalem, the disciples remain completely blind to what the journey implies. While for Jesus the way to Jerusalem has prophetic implications leading to the cross, to the disciples, the way to Jerusalem is just a journey with no theological or prophetic implications. While for the disciples the way to Jerusalem is a journey amongst many with no historical precedents, to Jesus the way to Jerusalem is a fulfilment of the prophecy. It is in Jerusalem where Jesus will be killed.

Christian discipleship requires humility and obedience. On the way to Jerusalem, the disciples remain in the footsteps of their saviour. Yet, though taking efforts to remain behind their saviour, they always sidestep, failing to follow on the way, for their principles remain set on human thoughts. Where Jesus sees the way to Jerusalem as destiny, as a purpose-driven mission, the disciples remain clueless, only to see themselves as being propelled by fate. The weighty veil of humanity makes it impossible for the disciples to discern the realm of divine grace behind Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. With humility and obedience, the disciples still have to accept to get behind Jesus so as to follow faithfully. It is in sidestepping that the disciples will come to realize who Jesus is. John tries to discern the mystery of divine grace by grounding discipleship on 'following' as a landmark of Christian identity, but immediately sidesteps, getting it wrong, when he begins to see membership as a clue to Christian discipleship. For Jesus 'following' without obedience and humility is pointless in the fellowship of faith. On both occasions, John addresses Jesus as "teacher" and immediately sidesteps, demonstrating that he has not followed Jesus' teaching (Mark 9:38). It is very human to accept someone as a teacher but failing to accept his teaching, or to accept someone as a leader but remaining sceptical and far from his or her leadership. What counts for Christ is not much about following but about doing the work. Work should speak louder than our appearance. We must put ourselves to pain, that we may not bring ourselves to ruin; self must be denied, that it may not be destroyed. Even pain is a positive experience because when you are in pain you go through a very deep soul searching. If you are afraid to lose you have not learned how to win. What you learn in adversity no university will ever teach you. If the disciples have sidestepped countlessly on the way, it is in sidestepping that we find our way to grace. It is in sidestepping that we will learn how to get behind Jesus in order to follow.

### **Transforming our visions into blueprints of grace**

By our own effort, it would be always difficult to find the way to Jerusalem, the way that leads to glory. The gospel of Christ should assist the believer in transforming his or her fate

into destiny. The German theologian Deidrick Bonhoeffer has painfully hinted at this on the Cost of Discipleship. For Bonhoeffer, the way that leads to glory is narrow but the one that leads to destruction is wide open, so we must always opt for the narrow gate for where life is lost, life is found. We must put ourselves to pain, that we may not bring ourselves to ruin; self must be denied, that it may not be destroyed. The message of the gospel should assist us in transforming our dreams into reality, our visions into blueprints of divine grace. Christ insists that those that have the salt of grace, must make it appear that they have, that they have salt in themselves, a living principle of grace in their hearts which works out all defiling dispositions, and everything that leads to decay in the human soul. As this gracious salt will keep our conversation with others so, that we may not offend any of Christ's little ones, but might be at peace with one another. The present story today takes us back to the power of words, which Professor Richard preached about Sundays ago. Words have the power to build but may also have the power to destroy depending on how they are used. Christ should remain our season, our salt on what to say and not say. If we love children as Christ did, we must also realize that unemployment affects children, poverty affects children. We cannot afford to see children losing parents through poverty. We cannot afford to see parents who cannot afford to send their children to school because of poverty. The good news is that charity must begin at home. If we must take heed of doing anything to hinder others from good, and occasion their falling much more careful must we be to void everything that will take us off from our duty, or lead us to evil, and that which does not lead to grace.

Amen