

Text: Mark 10:35-45

Date: 17th October 2021

Title: The Upside-Down Kin-dom

Introduction

Let us begin our reflection on the Gospel text for this morning – Mark 10:35-45 – by recapping on the wider contexts in which this passage is located. Mark 8:31-10:52 focuses on the formation of the disciples. What it means to follow Jesus is set over time in the context of a journey. It describes the travel of Jesus and the disciples from Bethsaida to Jericho on the way to Jerusalem. During this travel narrative, Jesus warns his disciples three times of his impending death and resurrection (8:27-9:1; 9:30-37; 10:32-34).

Even with this clear language, however, his disciples remained confused. They again and again show that they don't get what Jesus is about.

- In Mark 8:31-9 when Jesus speaks about his impending “great suffering, rejection and death”, Peter rebuked him. Clearly Peter didn't get it.
- In Mark 9:2-8 we are told that Jesus brought Peter, James, and John and Jesus was transfigured. And Peter suggested to Jesus that they make three dwellings – one for Jesus, one for Elijah and one for Moses. Peter wanted to stay put.
- And in Mark 9:30-30 we had the argument about who is the greatest between the disciples? Then Jesus took a little child and said: *“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me”*. (9:37)
- In Mark 9:38-41 we have the story of another exorcism. Again, the disciples didn't get it. *John said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us”. But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us”*. A sure sign of tribalism.
- In Mark Chapter 10:17-31 we have the story of the rich young man who we reflected on last Sunday. He came to Jesus and asked, *“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* You know the story. At the end: *“Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me”*. The reaction of the rich young man wasn't surprising. *“When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”* And then Peter said to Jesus: *“Look, we have left everything and followed you”*. I guess Peter wanted to make sure that they are duly compensated for their sacrifices.

Then Jesus said to him: *“Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life”*. Then Jesus added: *“But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first”*.

In the preceding scene (10:32-34), Jesus gives his final and most detailed prediction of his trial, suffering, death, and resurrection. He is about to enter Jerusalem (11:1-11) and confront the temple-based aristocracy. James and John request privileged places of authority in seats at Jesus’ right and left. You know what? It appears they simply have not heard Jesus at all — or refused to hear the dreadful news — even though he has repeated the prediction three times.

Jesus replies, doubtless with considerable frustration, that they don’t have a clue what they are asking for. Can they drink the same ‘cup’ of suffering and death he must drink, a cup that he himself will later ask to be removed if possible? (14:36) Can they be baptized with the same baptism Jesus is to endure? Still clueless, James and John affirm that they can, but, surprisingly, Jesus says that they will.

Mark tells us that “When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John”. The rest of the brothers fume over the brothers’ bid to outflank them in importance. And we can understand why they are angry. They’ve worked just as hard, walked just as many miles, listened to just as many sermons, and given up everything, as Peter told us last week, to follow Jesus. Why should James and John get the best seats, and not them? Now some of us expect the disciples to be different. But clearly the twelve don’t seem to get it.

Anyway, what did Jesus do? Jesus calls them together. He doesn’t reprimand them. He doesn’t tell them to settle down and behave. He doesn’t tell them to grow up and start acting like mature disciples, instead of squabbling like little children. **Jesus does this instead.** He calls them over and includes them in a conversation on leadership. *“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.”* (10:42) They regularly ‘overpower’ and ‘tyrannize’ others. They rely on coercion and control to maintain their dominance and privileges. And Jesus said to the twelve: *“But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”* Once again, Jesus reveals that He is the King of an upside-down kin-dom. His ideas on leadership go against the grain of what our world says.

How do we measure greatness? Our world tends to define greatness in terms of power, privilege, and prestige. We measure the importance of a person by external markers – the house they own, the car they drive, the ostentatious nature of their lifestyle. We are impressed by the visible achievement of people: their prestigious honours and academic degrees, the importance of their profession, and sometimes even the accomplishments of their children.

Clearly the disciples had bought into the reigning cultural leadership model, in which leaders dominate their subordinates through power and authority and in which leadership itself was seen as a vehicle to status and prestige. However, in the kingdom of God, Jesus called his disciples to follow him instead of the leadership patterns of the world. Rather than relating to their followers as ‘master’ or ‘lord’, they were called to serve their communities.

Jesus offers himself as an example of what being a servant leader looks like when he states that the Son of Man did not come to be served but to give his life as a ransom for many. So, in absolute contrast, greatness among Jesus’ followers is measured by their ability to live as servants and slaves, even if that life means suffering oppression at the hands of those who wield power. Jesus was different than what everyone expected at the time, and Jesus’ style of leadership is still jarring today. Jesus still shakes things up, turns things upside down, and reorders our world.

Servant leadership, which Jesus embodied, is leadership for the sake of the other, leadership that asks, “How can I serve you?”, “How can I be of service?” and truly means it. Servant leadership is unselfish, not concerned in the least with what we can get out of leadership, but solely concerned with how someone else can flourish. Many servant leaders never make headlines, but they make a difference in people’s lives. Sometimes they make all the difference.

Robert K. Greenleaf writes in *Servant Leadership*, that the true test of effective leadership is two-fold. Do those served grow as persons? Do they become healthier, wiser, freer, more likely to become servants themselves?

Secondly, what is the effect on the least privileged? *“It is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”*

It’s easy, looking back 2000 years, to marvel how thick-headed the disciples were as Jesus taught them about the cost of discipleship, about what it means to be leaders. But we fall into the same trap they did.

We *think* we know what it means to follow Jesus, but we can't believe he'd really ask us to do anything dangerous – or even be uncomfortable. Do we really understand what it means to follow Jesus? Do we really?

The denseness of the disciples is amazing. They have been with Jesus for a long time, but clearly, they are oblivious to what he says. It seems that most of the time they don't really get what Jesus is all about.

But the failure of the 12 to understand means hope for us. There are moments when we do not have a clue as to what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ. I shouldn't speak on your behalf. Personally, there are many moments in my faith journey that I don't really get what Jesus all about too! However, if Jesus did not give up on his original twelve disciples, then I can imagine that he will not readily give me up.

The passage also reminds us of the danger in the familiar. We can know the *old, old story*, but that does not mean that it has captured our hearts. Jesus once quoted Isaiah, saying: *These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. (Matt. 15:8)*

The disciples could hardly claim that they were unaware of what Jesus had been teaching. Sadly, like most of us, they were not always listening. Just because the message is familiar does not mean it has taken root in our lives. Many of Jesus' teachings on the surface sound weird. Jesus' overall message, summarized in His sermon on the plain (Luke 6:17-49), reverses the first century social order by placing the poor and meek first and the rich and powerful last. In the oppressive first century Galilean setting, the poor and meek were the impoverished Jews (particularly women and children), while the Roman and Jewish male elites constituted the powerful upper class.

Luke 6:17-49: *"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.²¹ Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.²² Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. ²⁵ Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.²⁶ Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.*

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do

not demand it back. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³² "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. ³³ And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that".

Most teachings of Jesus go against every human instinct. They are counter cultural. They are radical reversals of convention wisdoms. The process of human evolution, thus far, has favoured the strong, the powerful, and the paranoid. These are our own 'default positions'.

In a radical reversal, Jesus says that true life comes from denying one's evolutionary instincts and following instead the 'way' of denial oneself, of service for others.

Let me conclude my reflection with the words from William Loader, a Uniting Church Minister and emeritus professor of New Testament at Murdoch University in Perth, Western Australia:

"The story does not leave us insightfully limp, passive and weak – or pretending to be so. It empowers. Jesus was powerful. The liberation he lived did not require him to seek power for his own sake, but to own the power he had in compassion and in self-giving. His call and example was not to avoid leadership, but to be and model a new kind of being, including being powerful and a leader. He came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many."

The solution to bad theology, is not 'NO theology' but to teach better theology.

The solution to a revengeful god, a judgemental god, a violent god, god hates LGBTQI is not 'NO God' but to keep reminding people of the amazing, unconditional, inclusive love of God.

The solution to autocratic leaders, is not 'NO leaders' but to replace them with servant leaders.

"You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."