

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 25 Year B 2021

A couple of weeks ago, few of us would have failed to have been moved by the terrible scenes emerging from Afghanistan. The images that flooded our screens and other media of people attempting to flee - knowing the inevitable when the Taliban took power – of people crowding Kabul airport, the looks of desperation, were shocking and horrific. And we might say put some of our issues and difficulties into perspective. And we were left, once more (if we needed it), with a striking lesson of how men of power can wreak a terrible toll, and how people hungry for power, desiring to rule the hearts and lives of men and women, will do anything to achieve it.

Before we too enthusiastically take our place on the seat of condemnation, it is good to remember that bloody, cruel and vengeful episodes are part of the history of all peoples, including our own. But this current example is a reminder of how elusive a rule of order, indeed of peace, can be. The divisions and disputes which tear the world apart would for the most part never occur if the only desire of those who rule and govern us was to serve without caring about what position they occupied; nor how they might advance their own agenda, or how they could line their own pockets. As people of faith, we must ever seek to recommit – and *commend* – the gospel alternative. If we were brave enough, and wise enough, and humbler enough to truly en flesh the gospel vision, what a different world it would be...

This better part of humanity - of humility, of service, of not asserting personal power and prestige - is the challenge laid out for us in the Gospel today. Last week we heard Jesus ask his disciples, *'who do people say that I am?'* After a range of responses to the question, Peter chimes in and boldly and confesses, *'You are the Christ.'* Peter recognises that in Jesus is the long hoped for Messiah, the Anointed One of God. We heard, though, that Jesus distances himself from certain associations that had grown up around the hope of the Messiah, in particular the idea that the Messiah would be a kingly figure, after the model and inspiration of King David. Jesus dissociates himself with that image of a kingly ruler and instead introduced the idea of *the Son of Man* who would be rejected and betrayed, who would suffer and die.

To stress the point, it's repeated in the Gospel today. *The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men; they will put him to death...* It means we are to take this seriously! Nothing could more clearly and decisively make a break from the older hopes for a messiah than the image Jesus himself presents. But this adjustment - this new and revised image of the Messiah - proves a hard sell, and this too is reflected in the Gospel today. It is one of the things that suggests that the Gospels are more reliable and historical than they are often given credit for: they so often present the disciples of Jesus as stubborn, thick headed and of missing the point completely. If you were making it all up, you wouldn't present the people who were charged with carrying the message of Jesus in such a poor light. But that is what we find here.

Now, clearly all this talk about a Messiah was getting the disciples terribly excited. But it as if they had latched onto the exciting bit but skipped over or ignored the difficult bit. They were letting their imaginations run away with them. They were dreaming of what a kingdom under 'king Jesus' might look. And it seems that in their imaginations it looked a lot like all the old images of who messiah *should* be. And tragically they ignored all the other stuff about rejection and betrayal, and death and taking up your cross. They are stuck with the idea that the Messiah Jesus was a king Jesus. And if King Jesus, well then, there might be plush and powerful jobs in the running for them.

And so the disciples are vying for those hot jobs. But deep down they must have known this wasn't quite on the mark. When Jesus asks them what they were arguing about we are told, *'they say nothing'*, as if they were shame-faced kids caught out for saying or doing something wrong. But Jesus takes this seriously. We are told he sits down in rabbinic position of teacher. And his simple lesson is this: *if anyone wants to be first he must make himself last of all and servant of all.*

Far from being an impossibly idealistic view, it makes a great deal of sense. The great figures, those who are remembered as having made a real contribution to life, are not those who say, *'how can I use the state and society and my role to further my own prestige and personal ambitions?'* but *'how*

can I use my personal gifts and talents, with what has been allotted me in life, to serve others.' They are the ones who affect real and lasting and positive change! But even if it does make a great deal of sense, this vision of things does remain difficult. In our heart of hearts, we know this is right and good and proper. But it remains a challenge.

The challenge is highlighted in the gospel when Jesus takes a child, puts his arm around them and presents them to the disciples as the test of true discipleship. We miss the impact because of the sentimental view we bring to children and childhood. And children now seem to rule the world, getting away with whatever they like! Not so in the ancient world. Children were certainly loved by their parents but had no rights. Indeed, in the Greco-roman world Jesus inhabits children, outside the family, had *no* value, certainly no voice, and if unwanted could be left to die on the town's rubbish dump.

It's easy to be nice to people you want to impress. It's not that hard to go out of your way for those you think are your equals. It's easy to curry favour with the influential and important. It's easy to overlook the simple, the poor, and the voiceless; easy to exclude those who are too different, who look different, speak different, have different ideas.

The challenge of the gospel is one of the disconcerting reminders we encounter again and again and again throughout the gospels: the vision of the kingdom Jesus proclaims, his dream of our life with God, turns everything on its head. Our natural preferences, the usual way we order our lives and society, the ordinary way we interact with each other just doesn't cut it. The reign of God is *not* simply a case of try hard and use common sense! If we are going to take seriously Jesus' invitation to follow him, it means a complete reorientation of our lives and hearts. It is tempting to hold on to old attachments, old ideas about how we should relate to each other, as even the disciples show. And we know how persistent and resilient some of the ideas can be, even for ourselves, and most certainly in the world around us. But Jesus has something far more wonderful in mind for those who truly follow him. Amen.