

Trinity 17, September 22nd, 2024

8.00 Holy Communion

Jeremiah 11.18-20, Mark 9:30-37

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

We continue our readings in Mark's gospel through a section that brings together various sayings of Jesus in a thematic rather than a chronological way. But the context is Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem, coming from the very north of Israel and passing through Galilee on the way, and calling in at Jesus' hometown of Capernaum. Two separate events are recorded – the first being Jesus' second prediction of his death and resurrection, that resulted in a stunned and puzzled silence on the part of the disciples; and the second when Jesus challenged the disciples about what they were talking about on the road. The response again was silence, but perhaps this time born out of degree of shame in view of the fact they were argued as to which of them was the greatest. And this leads to the picture of Jesus putting his arm around a little child, and saying

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.

It seems to me that what these two episodes have in common, and the reason for them being presented sequentially, is because they both seem to overturn the accepted order of things. The first talks of Jesus, recognised by his disciples as the Messiah, predicting that he would be put to death. Whatever the disciples were expecting, it was not that. The Messiah should reign gloriously, not be killed by the religious authorities. And we see Jesus, referring to himself yet again with the ambiguous phrase of the Son of Man, which can either refer simply to his humanity, or to the apocalyptic figure in the book of Daniel, who comes before God, the Ancient of Days, and is given all authority and power. So, on the one hand, Jesus speaks of himself as both as suffering and dying in his humanity, through the agency of "human hands", but on the other hand being raised from death by God and receiving from him authority and power to rule – an overturning of the supposed power of the religious authorities.

The second episode continues in a similar vein. The disciples are arguing about who is the greatest – which is not entirely childish as they were perhaps expecting that some sort of authority would be needed under the Messiah's earthly rule. Which if them was best fitted for such a high-status role? But Jesus, knowing what they are saying, sets a small child before them – not as a demonstration of innocence and meekness (are small children ever thus?) but as a demonstration of someone who has no status at all within the society of the time. And he effectively tells them that those who welcome such folk, of no status at all, effectively welcome Jesus, the Son of Man.

Taken together, it seems to me that these two episodes have a lot to say about status, about our place in society. Status is determined in a number of ways – by birth, ranging from the

holders of hereditary titles, through the class structure that is still so prevalent in this country. Or perhaps status is judge by education – whether or not we have a university degree, and if so what level. Status can be conferred by role – certain professions are regarded as being of higher status than others, of more importance than others and are generally better paid. Doctors are of higher status than Amazon delivery drivers; politicians are of higher status than plumbers for example. But if you have a leaking pipe in your house, plumbers have a greater importance, if not status, than politicians. So perhaps status can also be something to do with the immediate situation. Status can also be determined by ethnicity and race of course, and by religion – and these are the cause of much war and civil strife.

The church is not of course immune from this, and has its own hierarchy and status – Archbishops, Bishops, Archdeacons, Rural Deans, parish clergy, curates, – then you lot.

But the gospel message overturns all this. In God's eyes, the status of all humanity is pretty much the same, regardless of the role we play. In our natural state. Paul writes in the letter to the Romans.

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God

All are in need of forgiveness and redemption and that of course was the point of Jesus' ministry. He came proclaiming reconciliation with God through belief in him and through his passion and death made this reconciliation possible. And for those who believe the situation is changed – and indeed a new, divine status is bestowed. The apostle Peter was to write of the early church.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people

In God's sight our status is solely determined by where we stand in relationship with him. Within God's family of the church, there are still roles that need to be fulfilled – including both clergy and laity, but we need to be careful that we don't assign status to these roles. Again, Paul was to write to the church at Corinth, where he talked about gifts and roles

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

And that argument was to lead on, not to some description of hierarchy, but rather to his great hymn on love, that ends with what are called the three “theological virtues”

Faith, hope, love abide, these three, but the greatest of them all is love.

And in these three virtues, the insistence on status has no part.

The reading we have closes with Jesus saying that those who welcome one such as a child, one without status, welcome him, and welcome his father. And that too we need to be very aware of. The set readings from the epistle aren't usually used at this service, but if they had been we would have heard last week from the letter of James, the brother of Jesus,

who gives some very practical teaching for how we should conduct ourselves in this regard. He wrote.

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

And he ends with

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbour as yourself, you are doing right

So today's message is very simple. Firstly, that in his life and death, Jesus overturned all the normal expectations of status and showed us that the status offered by our birth, our education, our job, our race, or even our church life is transitory, and our ultimate status comes from our relationship with Jesus. Secondly, this disregard of earthly status is vital to the life of the church and our call is to share the love of God with all, whatever labels our society might place on them.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen