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Introduction

“The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there” is a quote by L. P. Hartley from his novel, ‘The Go-Between’. It tells the story of a boy of 13 used by adults in a way which comes to a very bad end. When Jesus places the child in front of the disciples – what is he doing? In what way is he using that child? Is the child like the boy in the ‘Go-Between’ used in a manner that is unfair? What would be the general first century Palestinian view of children? How were they treated and perceived? This is important to our understanding of the text for this week.

As you read through the gospel think about the contrasts between the adults and the child drawn by the gospel writer. Maybe also consider what assumptions are normally made about these texts, and how far you hold them to be true to the event itself.

Text

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?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 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 arms, 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.”

Comment

This is not the first time in our journey through Mark that we have met the gospel writer’s emphasis on secrecy. In this case, Jesus is wanting to talk about his death and the disciples are desperate to avoid the subject. There is a disjunction between what is important for Jesus, secrecy, his mission, his death; and what is important for the disciples, who is the greatest amongst them. The introduction of the child

only makes sense in the context of the discussion of both Jesus' death and the disciples' self-importance. Matthew tells this story slightly differently. He sanitises or improves the disciples' role. In Matthew 18: 1–5, the exchange runs like this: 'At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me?"

In Matthew, the disciples come to Jesus with an abstract question, 'Who is the greatest' whereas in Mark, Jesus has noticed that the disciples are arguing, and it is he who questions them. Mark forces us to take a closer look at the disciples' internal disagreement. Jesus refers to them as arguing and the exchange was not pleasant, a discussion of greatness that has a bite to it.

How many times in life, at work or at church, do people come up against this same problem, and the bitterness it can cause? At home, I keep hens. The hens have a 'pecking order' – that is they have an order in which they access food and they will peck each other in violence, to prevent another hen moving up the queue and getting to become 'top-hen' in the flock. In the jungle, where the modern hen's genetic ancestors lived, the hen who slept in the highest branch was physically the top hen. She was also the safest as the predators, jungle cats, would climb the tree at night to take roosting birds. The birds on the lowest branches were therefore the most disposable. In human society, we have a more complex matrix of relationships, it is thousands of years since danger from predators was a real concern. Yet, we can hold on to primitive 'pecking order' behaviours. Those lower down the tree can 'choose to lose' to keep a social situation smooth, those who want to be at the top can often demonstrate some of the worst traits of human behaviour in climbing the ladder, or the 'greasy pole' as it is sometimes referred to in politics.

Jesus' use of the child was to break the disciples' arrogance. He shoots a big dose of reality into their 'pecking' at each other. Their argument is broken with a counter-argument which is a real child, standing before them, putting them to shame. We often talk in Christian circles about people being too quick to feel guilty, or carrying guilt which is not their fault, but in fact, Jesus is more than comfortable with shaming the proud and arrogant, turning their values upside down, reversing the pecking order of first century Palestine, where the child was traditionally at the bottom, and making the disciples feel the awkwardness created by their own bad behaviour.

'You should be ashamed of yourselves,' Jesus seems to be saying, not inappropriate shame, not unnecessary guilt, but the real shame that comes from having got it wrong. There's a flip side, though, anyone who welcomes 'one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.' Children are at the bottom of the first century 'pecking order' but, if the disciples change their attitudes, they won't be worrying about who might be at the top, as they will be busy welcoming the one at the bottom.

For it is at the bottom of the heap that we welcome God, in humility and in service, and those who will argue and bicker to get to the top should be ashamed of themselves.

Response

Nature Walk: Go for a walk in a park, a wood, a rural place, and see if you can see complex or hierarchical relationships in the natural world around you. Not all creatures have 'pecking orders' like the hens. Ants, bees and termites live in complex communities like our cities. Reflect on the world God made, and where it

is in the world that we meet God.

OR:

Community Action: Think in your community, area or society where the 'bottom' of the heap would be? Perhaps take some time to write down terms we use to describe people by their income or social standing, like 'upper class' or 'sink estate'.

What can you do to seek out the lowest in our society, and meet God there? Are there children, or disadvantaged groups that could use your help? What would you be able to do for them?

Prayer

God in the child, who placed a child into the argument

Who put the proud and selfish to shame

Empower us to stand with the child, the weak, the ones at the bottom

Of the lowest 'sink estate'

And grant that there we may find you

And the one who sent you,

Father, son and spirit,

One God forever

Amen