

## Lost in translation? Mark 9: 30-37

Were you the kind of student (in school... at college or uni...) who was brave enough to put up your hand when you didn't understand what the teacher was saying? I definitely was not and always admired the people who were braver than me... often worried that I would look foolish, I was usually nervous about putting up my hand ... never realising that it would help both me and the teacher if I could be a bit more honest...

Today's reading from Mark's gospel has the disciples in that position... not understanding ... being too afraid to ask for an explanation... and it starts with a picture of Jesus as a man in a hurry. He's on his way to Jerusalem... passing through Galilee... stopping at Capernaum... walking open-eyed into the maelstrom. *He* is... but the team he's picked are not exactly on the same journey, even though they are walking right beside him ...

Jesus says: I'm going to be betrayed and killed and I will come back to life.

The disciples hear: la la la la la... The narrator in Mark's gospel says they don't understand.

Why not? I suppose because it's a hard thing to take in... because they don't want to hear what seems to them like bad news for Jesus and probably for them... Because it's not what they had signed up for...

When they said yes to the invitation to follow, what *did* they have in mind, I wonder? A radical reimagining of the faith of their ancestors? A grassroots alternative community focused on love and peace and understanding somewhere out in the desert...? A hard-core political uprising against the Romans?

Yet as he maps out the journey in a few words, Jesus talks about none of that, but about betrayal ... death... and most mysterious of all, resurrection...

Not exactly high hopes, then...

Have you ever applied for and started a new job, and been disappointed that it wasn't the dream job you'd thought it was... or perhaps you've moved house ... and found that things aren't entirely transformed... that the new house is unlikely to be the forever home you dreamt of...

Jesus was always... from the get-go... on a collision course with the authorities... and on a bigger mission than anything focused on a small gathering or a small country... or even the whole of the Roman empire... although he shares this with his followers, they don't often understand.

For them, Jesus' words are lost in translation and they are too afraid to ask him what he means... too afraid perhaps of what kind of answer they might get...

So, instead of requesting an explanation... or expressing their concern about the fate Jesus describes for himself... or suggesting some alternative scenarios, they start a small argument amongst themselves about who is top disciple ... Centuries before Muhammad Ali coined the phrase, they are debating who is *the greatest*.

Perhaps we can understand why, when we remember that, as Mark tells the story, some of them (Peter, James and John) have just had this ecstatic vision... a hint of who Jesus really is... the event we call the transfiguration... where they see Jesus dazzling white, standing and talking ... with Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest names from Israel's history ... so perhaps they are expecting Jesus to pick out these three witnesses as the premier league disciples...

Perhaps some of them are imagining themselves in the place where Moses and Elijah had stood on the mountain top... or perhaps they are all thinking there might be a kind of Oscars for being a good disciple... perhaps they are expecting a very heartfelt thanks from Jesus for being such good and helpful followers?

I guess we can understand a little of how the disciples feel... in the next chapter of Mark's gospel, Peter reflects on how much they have given up to be with Jesus... *Look, we have left everything and followed you*, he says.

Naturally, they want their input to be recognised... we can relate to that, can't we... it's easy to think of our lives as full of thankless tasks ... all the domestic duties... mowing the lawn... cleaning the bathroom... sorting out the household accounts... the childcare for children or grandchildren... the stuff we do in our villages, in our churches... the extra hours we put into our paid jobs... For all these things it's great when someone notices... and says thank you... But it's important to remember – as the disciples do not – that thanks is not *owed* to us... but freely given. And it's important to

remember, too, when we ourselves are the recipients of someone else's labour, to give our own thanks to them... to the many people who serve us in our daily lives...

Now the disciples are silent... not willing to admit what they've been discussing... into their silence, Jesus offers an object lesson... he brings a small child into the circle... with these words:

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

If you said that today, it wouldn't be such a radical thing. But in the first century CE, a child was considered a rather different kind of being. If Jesus had been speaking Aramaic (the language that most people in the region spoke) the word he'd have used for child was also the word for servant. Almost the same is true of the Greek word that's in the text of Mark's gospel: it's a general word for child, but it's *also* the word for a young slave. Behind this is the hint that children, like enslaved people... were the least important and perhaps not exactly people...

*'Whoever wants to be first ... whoever wants to be the greatest... must be last of all and servant of all.'*

The general protocol was that everyone – slaves, children, women, younger members of the household - are there to serve the (male) head of the household. Here, Jesus reverses the priorities: inspired by him and for his sake, we are to serve the least important, the most vulnerable, the people on the edges.

Our hierarchies are different, but the radical message is just as powerful and just as challenging... how can we enact Jesus' command in our time? Are we willing to become the servants of the least, in Jesus' name? I don't know what that might look like for you. Perhaps it could mean being more careful with our energy use, limiting our carbon footprint, because we know that climate change is affecting most deeply the world's poorest people. Perhaps it could mean cutting down on our food shop so we can put food into a foodbank collection... perhaps it could mean taking time to phone or visit someone who's on their own.

My guess is that for all of us it might involve giving up something like our time, or privilege, or personal comforts, because ultimately serving

involves making others' priorities our priority. In the name and for the sake of the servant king, may we learn how to serve.