

## **Sermon Sunday 23 September (Nijmegen, Morning Prayer with sermon at 12.00)**

*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen*

### **Jesus taking time apart with his disciples, and with us**

As human beings we can be so incredibly obsessed with numbers and success. The value of a thinker, a politician or a teenager are almost solely dependent on the number of likes, or hearts they receive on Facebook or Instagram. Unfortunately, this culture has also influenced the church. I myself do this very much as well. And it is so easy to hide behind the fact that numbers are important to sustain us and keep things going. Or to decide which activities are worthwhile to pour our energy into. In Utrecht I've been responsible for our ministry to students for the past three years. Every year we organise two big welcoming events (in September and in February) for new international students in the city, with varying success. So we also hosted one last February. We organised the event, put a lot of effort and energy in promoting and arranging everything, to find ourselves with only five people we hadn't met before. I was a little bit disappointed, because I had hoped for more people and wasn't sure I should spend so much energy and work on only five people that were unlikely to come back anyway. We ate together, we played games with them and invited them to our events.

Thankfully, Jesus isn't like me, Jesus isn't the kind of teacher who is constantly obsessed with having greater numbers, doing cool exorcisms and performing spectacular healings. The kind of leader who is constantly in the picture and can't get enough of all the praise and applause. Jesus does exorcisms and spectacular healings, but he always does them to help someone else, not to be praised for them in itself. And Jesus is very aware that with big numbers comes overlooking of individuals. That's why He decides to take some time apart with his disciples. He loves his disciples and he cares about their personal and spiritual growth. He wants them not just to admire and run after Him, but to become like He is. To become a person who truly cares about others, a person who doesn't look down on people but helps them to get up. A person who is truly humble and knows that leadership is not about commanding, but about serving.

Being together here in this communion of saints to express our shared faith in and love for Jesus, Jesus takes us too apart to spend time with Him. He wants to teach us, he wants us to grow in faith and love in Him, so we might live life in all its fullness. (John 10:10) We're here together, to look at Jesus, listen to His words and trust in Him. But at the same time we, just like the disciples, might encounter a great number of things that we do not understand. And in that situation, it is very encouraging for us to know that Jesus wants to spend time apart with us, to teach us and to help us to follow him, despite our lack of understanding!

### **Jesus' Predictions of his suffering**

When Jesus is taking time apart with his disciples he starts to teach them. And it is very strange teaching indeed. This part is in most translations of the Gospel announced as something like 'Jesus Predicts His Death a Second Time' or 'Jesus again foretells his death'. This was also my first impression of this passage, and maybe the disciples were the first ones to make this mistake! Because Jesus is not only predicting his passion and death on the cross, he is also predicting his glorious resurrection on the third day! Sometimes when someone tells us something that we don't like to hear, or we think we've heard before, we just stop listening. We might still look like we're listening, but we've judged and we won't hear the other out. The Gospel tells us the disciples were too afraid to ask Him about it. They didn't want to know, and maybe they didn't ask because they hoped He would just stop talking about it.

And therefore they might have missed, what I initially also missed when preparing this sermon. The hope of the resurrection is here as well as the sadness of the suffering. As Bede, an English monk

from the early middle ages said: 'He always mingles together sorrowful and joyful things, that sorrow should not by its suddenness frighten the Apostles, but be borne by them with prepared minds.' There will be bad, there will be suffering, but there is hope too!

Following Jesus is no guarantee at all of a calm and easy life. The Anglican theologian Richard Burridge wrote a book about how the four Gospels each portray Jesus in a different way, with a different context and focus. The Gospel of Mark was written in the 60s or early 70s, only about 40 years after the death of Jesus. Probably written down by St. Mark, listening to what St. Peter was telling the churches in Rome.

And the Christian life wasn't easy those days and people struggled with that. How can it be that we are being persecuted by emperor Nero because of our faith in Jesus? How can it be that in Jerusalem different sects are killing each other and it was destroyed in 70AD by the Romans? Where is the prosperity that this Good News of Jesus Christ is supposed to bring?

Jesus tells us in the Gospel of today that even the Son of God, who never did anything wrong, had to suffer. Jesus didn't have a prosperous life. Yes, Jesus even says 'Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.' (Matthew 8:20) Mark makes it clear to us that the Good News of Jesus Christ is not so much about an earthly powerful King who will destroy the Romans and all other enemies, it's about a whole different kingdom with status, rules and logic that are not based on things in this world, but on things that are from another world. This is what Jesus is trying to teach his disciples.

### **The lesson for the disciples**

What about the disciples in today's Gospel reading? In the Gospel of Mark Jesus makes this kind of prediction or declaration three times. In chapter 8 Jesus already predicted his suffering and resurrection. Peter responds to that by rebuking Jesus. Here in chapter 9 the disciples answer with silence and discussing who's the greatest. In chapter 10 the third prediction of Jesus is immediately followed by James and John asking Him if they can sit on his right and left hand in his glory.

In response to Jesus prediction of his suffering, death and resurrection, the disciples start to discuss who is the greatest! What a contrast. The road of spiritual growth for the disciples seems to be very bumpy, following Jesus doesn't make them perfect people, something we might relate to!

How often do we feel like these disciples, how often do we get discouraged by our lack of faith, our lack of growth in love, in humility, in kindness, in patience, in persistence, in charity, in temperance and in chastity? Why isn't it just a little bit more easy for us?

An important lesson the disciples have yet to learn is that Jesus' kingdom and his understanding of power and leading, just as his focus on time management and numbers, are quite contrary to the way the disciples (and we) naturally would think. The laws of earthly logic, economics or efficiency do not apply at all. But as long as we keep on thinking it does, like the disciples in today's Gospel, we will have a long way to go and it is even more difficult for us to understand how Jesus' kingdom works. St. Paul summarizes the lesson Jesus is trying to teach his disciples, in his letter to the Philippians! 'Jesus made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant [...] he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on the cross! therefore God exalted him to the highest place and have him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (Philippians 2:5-11) That is God's logic.

Keeping this in mind, we go back to today's Gospel and see that Jesus then, following His Godly logic, takes a child and puts it in the middle, embraces it and he says to them: 'Whoever welcomes one of

these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.'

J.C. Ryle, an Anglican bishop from the 19<sup>th</sup> century points at this image of Jesus holding the child as an example. He points us at what a great encouragement this is to all who work with and care for the cast down, the little, the poor, the outcasts in society. And the people they care for are often so looked down on, so neglected, but by loving them, by welcoming them in our lives, we welcome Jesus, and by welcoming Jesus we welcome the Father. As the rule of St. Benedict commands: Welcome every guest as you would welcome Christ and no matter who it is, bestow the honour on him that you would bestow on Christ.

### **Conclusion**

Back to the story I started this sermon with. The five new people at our 'big' event. I was very surprised to see four of these people turning up again at our next event. They kept on coming throughout the semester and I know that for some of them the time they spent in our group was very significant for their lives. So what happened?

I don't think we did anything differently than other times. But what was different was the amount of time we could spend with our guests and how much of our interest we could show them. With a smaller number of people we were far better able to welcome every individual and take time for people, like Jesus takes time for his disciples in today's Gospel.

We're here together today as a Christian community, a community created and shaped by Jesus Christ, who has called us here together. And in this community we are also called to let ourselves every day be shaped and formed by Jesus. Jesus is taking time apart with us this very morning, we sit in humility at his feet to learn and then go out ourselves to be a follower of Jesus in the world and become more like him. And our Christian community is supposed to reflect this and to be a place where we welcome everyone as Christ.

In large groups, it is so easy for people to be left out, to feel lonely while having a large amount of people around us. God cares about the individual and every soul, every person is precious to Him. As long as we are a Christian community that understands that, that welcomes people as Christ, where we take time for others like Jesus takes time for us, where people shape their lives every day by the Gospel and where with trial and error people attempt to follow Christ: Then we are a Christian community that Jesus intended and this Christian community, like Jesus' own community of twelve, will change the world.

Amen.