

**September 22, 2024 (Trinity 17) – Revd Wim Kuiper**  
**Anglican Church Arnhem & Nijmegen**

Readings: James 3.13-4.3, 7-8a; Mark 9.30-37

When I read the gospel of Mark, I am always intrigued by the picture he paints of Jesus' disciples. Imagine the time when this gospel was written and was read aloud in those freshly emerging Christian communities. The disciples that have played such a leading role in building up the early church, rightly revered as the great apostles, martyrs and saints that they in the end became, do not at all get a very glorious role in Mark's gospel. A gospel by the way, that is supposed to be written by him based on the first witness accounts he received from Saint Peter himself. So, also today, we are reminded of how the disciples struggled to understand Jesus. How they continued to say and do the wrong things, while they were still in the presence of the Messiah, listening to his public and private teaching. In today's passage we hear Jesus again telling them that he will be handed over to be killed by human hands and rise again after three days. How do they react to this? They remain silent. Mark tells us that they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. Sometimes silence is the right thing, but on this occasion perhaps it was something of a missed chance. And they remained silent again, but for a very different reason, when he asks them what they were arguing about on the road to Capernaum. And, to give you a spoiler of what we will read in two weeks' time, things don't get even worse for the disciples in the following chapter. Mark tells us how they try to send away parents, bringing their children to be blessed by Jesus, by 'sternly speaking to them'. This actually happens shortly after Jesus tells them to welcome children. After he takes this one child in his arms, right in front of them. Mark does not tell us how they reacted to that. Perhaps they remained silent again. Maybe just smiling somewhat awkwardly, or being embarrassed and hiding it by looking as neutral as possible. But apparently, they are not as endeared as we are by seeing Jesus with a child in his arms. Because on the next occasion, they try to keep the children away from him.

Because we are so familiar with this scene, we could be tempted to seeing it as just another nice and somewhat sentimental story about Jesus, meek and mild. Then we oversee how strange and unsettling in fact it was what Jesus is doing here. How extremely radical his teaching is at this point. Jesus reveals one of the most difficult things that his disciples are asked to grapple with as they become his followers. It may even feel like something of a cross, though in fact it is quite liberating. What I mean is letting go of that very human tendency to entangle ourselves in all those games around power and status. Always looking who has more or less of whatever we desire and to covet the positions and possessions of those we regard as higher than us. At the heart of these games is the classification of others that we make, thereby not treating them as of equal value as ourselves, let alone loving them as ourselves. The very best and most radical way for God to break through all those very human tendencies was to reveal himself in his Son Jesus Christ. A Messiah who, contrary to every common sense, proved to be not a glorious and majestic leader defeating the powers of evil in a straightforward human kind of way. Which, in his days, would have meant to fight the Roman occupation and liberate the people of Israel from it. But his overcoming of the powers of evil in a much more universal and timeless way, was brought about by the fact that he took upon himself the role of a lowly servant. By his willingness to let himself be handed over to human hands to kill him in a disgraceful manner. Thereby ultimately revealing and conquering evil by his resurrection.

This Gospel story is not meant to idealize children as opposed to adults. As all of us who have been involved in raising and teaching children know, the tendencies we are talking about are already visible at a very young age. It is only natural to covet the things that another children has and seems to thoroughly enjoy and to start a fight over it. Young children can also be quite rude, bullying others whom they regard as somehow different or lower than themselves, in their own struggle to gain

status and think better of themselves. We therefore rightly call out this kind of behaviour as childish, when we still see it in adults.

The child in this passage rather stands for a human being with the lowest possible status and the least amount of power. In first century Palestine, children were typically regarded and treated as such, in a way comparable to how the lowliest of servants and slaves were treated. So it must have been quite shocking to hear Jesus equaling his own status to them. Telling his disciples and us that when we welcome one of the lowliest of our society in his name, we are actually also welcoming him. In fact even welcoming God, who created all humans in his image. Welcoming the poor, the destitute, those who are without power and are looked down upon, is God's vision of living together well, properly honouring all of his creation. Whereas fussing about and craving after more power and status is the way of the world.

James in our epistle reading confronts us with a clear choice between these two kinds of wisdom; heavenly wisdom and earthly wisdom. The latter is indicated by harbouring bitter envy and selfish ambition, as he calls it. The first by being 'peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere'. He talks about the need to submit to God and to resist the devil, meaning those wrong desires and tendencies just mentioned. And it is of course such submitting to the will of the Father which is not only supremely taught, but also fully lived out by our Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps it is now also our turn to be silenced by this radical message of the Gospel when we reflect upon our own lives past and present from the perspective of these two wisdoms.

But James also offers us an important consolation at the end of the reading. 'Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.' Our movement towards God, a movement of repentance, will also make him to come closer to us. The movement of his Spirit that we can invite to take more and more hold of our hearts and minds, to become our second nature. A movement that brings about healing to us and growth into that heavenly wisdom. A growing ability to see ourselves and all our fellow human beings through the loving eyes of Jesus. Amen