

## **Mark 9:30-37, Jeremiah 11:18-20**

### **19<sup>th</sup> September 2021, St James, Bolton**

**Introduction:** Good morning. It's good to be with you again. Are you a good learner? Learning is at the heart of being a disciple of Jesus

Diocesan Values: Loving, Living, **Learning**

Learning: can be learning new things, and correcting things we knew wrongly. The latter is harder.

Jer 11:18 the Lord as the best and most reliable teacher, making things known to us.

Jesus is widely seen now, and during his time of earthly ministry, as a great teacher. But he had a lot of correcting to do, turning people's thoughts upside down. And I think it's still true today.

The Disciples had ideas about the Messiah. Some parts were right, others wrong. They were upside down. Jesus needed them to understand correctly. In particular, they (and most other people) thought the Messiah would come and restore Israel's fortunes, throw out the Roman occupiers (probably by force), and put things back to how they had been in the time of the great King David. Linking with where the passage goes next, and a slogan of a recent US President, they thought the Messiah would Make Israel Great Again.

So it wasn't just the disciples who had this wrong understanding. Jesus taught both big groups, the crowds who came to hear him, and the disciples as a small group. With the latter group, he went deeper. Often Mark in his gospel will talk about when they were "in the house" (see v33). That's when this small group learning took place. So it's good to know that many of you here take learning seriously, not just listening to talks on Sundays, but following up with JAM (Just a Minute) after the service and also in the study group on Monday evenings.

So with the smaller group, Jesus was trying to help them understand that suffering and being killed was part of the plan for the Messiah. It was all there in the Hebrew scriptures, in the old testament, especially Isaiah. But we can also see it in our passage from Jeremiah, in the image of the gentle lamb led to the slaughter (v19). But they didn't want to see it. As you heard if you were here last week, Jesus had already tried in Mark 8:31 to tell them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly, be rejected by the authorities, be killed, and then rise from the dead. It hadn't gone well, especially with Peter.

Then Peter, James and John (an even smaller group for learning) had accompanied Jesus up the mountain where he was transfigured and met with Moses and Elijah – great characters from Israel's history who had also not had an easy time and been rejected by the people. He again spoke with them about dying and rising from the dead – but just got a question back about Elijah! Their minds were trying to grasp it all, fitting this new teaching into their existing frameworks and understanding, but it wasn't working well!

So Jesus tried again, telling them bluntly in v31 that he would be betrayed and killed, but would rise again on the third day. In v32 we're told that they still didn't understand, but were afraid to ask. Not good!

The Disciples also had ideas about greatness, and were very interested in that. Some parts were right, others wrong. They were also upside down. Jesus needed them to understand correctly. I had always thought that they were arguing about which of them was the greatest. And that may be true. Peter, James and John had had the experience on the mountain with Jesus, so surely they

must be greater than the other 9. And Peter had just messed up and been rebuked by Jesus, so surely it was between James and John, and neither of them seem short of ego. But it might not have been. They could have been arguing whether Moses or Elijah was greater, and where Jesus fitted in the pecking order.

Lots of people today also get bothered about greatness. Who is the Greatest of All Time (the GOAT)? Sometimes, it's a claim that it's me eg Mohammed Ali. Other times it's commentators arguing about great sports people, without any claim that they themselves are any good. Greatest Tennis Player: Federer, Nadal, Djokovic? Raducanu?

Again, Jesus needs to correct their upside down understandings of greatness. And he uses a child to help them learn. In Matthew 18:3 Jesus says we need to become like children, and I think this applies especially to how we learn.

### **In what ways are we to be like children?**

**Trust** - children are dangerously credulous - hence concern about 'stranger danger', but adults are often very suspicious. Hence we find it hard to believe that God really does love us unconditionally.

**Humility** - Knowing your place in the pecking order - last! No pretensions of greatness. In Jewish society, a child was of no importance, subject to the authority of the elders - they were a responsibility to be looked after. Seeing others as greater than yourself. Hence context of disciples' dispute about who is the greatest.

Hence to become like children was to turn one's back on status

**Learning** - Learn most when we are small - how to walk, talk, read, write etc. Child are like sponges in terms of learning, largely without inbuilt prejudice and years of wrong understanding. Becoming like children also means being ready to learn new ways.

### **What do we need to learn (and unlearn)?**

About God? For the disciples it was that the Messiah can't or mustn't suffer. Oh yes, he must! (see Jeremiah 11:19 – led like a lamb to slaughter, and God will vindicate him).

What wrong ideas do we have about God?

Or about life and what's important (or who is important?)

What lessons from the Pandemic about what matters in life? Our climate for example?

There will also be lessons from the pandemic about church, how we do worship, ministry and mission.

How do we approach proclaiming the gospel afresh in this generation. For example, today there is:

a) A lack of belonging – we have a very lonely society compared with other times and places.

b) Suspicion of big ideas and power / authority (we see this with vaccine hesitancy and conspiracy theories). People do not behave because they are told to.

c) People don't sign up for membership of institutions / organisations - they choose which things they will spend time with.

d) People no longer relate to one place for their life - mobility over a lifetime, and also at any particular moment they are part of several different communities.

So often people come to belong, to find community, and then believe and behave - not the other way round.

We need to learn afresh how to evangelise, how to be church in the light of these developments.

The strategies of a generation ago, or last year may not be appropriate. Need to rethink things.

### **Perhaps we also need to learn to welcome Children better?**

In Mark 9:37 Jesus says that children are to be welcomed as Jesus' representatives. Therefore we are to welcome and receive them as we would welcome and receive Jesus.

The child also stands for the helpless and the unimportant. We are to welcome such people also - not just children. However our response to children will help us in our response to others. Those who do not tolerate children tend not to tolerate the social misfits, and vice versa.

Children are people who learn - and they learn from us - but what are they learning?

### **Conclusion: A disciple is a learner. What are you learning?**

Trust? Humility? How to learn? Welcoming others - especially the helpless and unimportant? And what God is really like?

### **Questions** (from Mark 9:30-37)

1. What ideas or understandings did Jesus turn upside down for his disciples (about himself, about greatness and anything else)?
2. What ideas or understandings has God turned upside-down for you?
3. What understandings of "greatness" exist today?
4. What would you say makes someone "great" – and how can you be more "great"?
5. Jesus uses a child as an example, and elsewhere (Matthew 18:3) says we need to become like children to enter the kingdom of God. What are the characteristics of a child that you think we need to seek?
6. What else are you learning at the moment?