Sermon for 25th in Ordinary Year B

Readings: James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

i

I think Jesus already had a pretty good idea what they had been quarrelling about on the road during the day. The disciples had been petulantly arguing who should be second in command to Jesus in the new kingdom. Had they had the courage to ask Jesus what he was talking about when he said he was going to be betrayed and killed, they might not have been so keen on the job, but ordinary human ambition had blinded them. They might one day get more than they bargained for.

So Jesus tries to explain what leadership means in his kingdom. Jesus takes a child and says you receive me in the same way as you receive a child.

That is not as easy a lesson as we might imagine. We must be careful not to assume the way our culture today would treat a small child is the same way as society in Jesus’ day. So what was the message the disciples heard from this teaching?

Children in Jesus’ society were at the very bottom of the social order. That is the most important aspect of this message. A child’s innocence, vulnerability and right to due care are concerns not wholly unknown to any society, but these concerns are chiefly those of our modern world. We do not have to go far back in our own history when children were treated very differently than they are today.

In Jesus’ society children were the social equivalent of a slave until they reached puberty. Children had no say in family decisions. They were entirely at the disposal of the father. Boys might be pampered rather more than girls by their mother because of their future status and the mother’s future dependence upon her sons if she was ever widowed, but until a boy was propelled into the world of men upon reaching puberty, even he had little social standing and minimal power.

This is the image Jesus has of his future ambassadors. Is this really what the disciples want? Are they really prepared to “make themselves the very last, if they want to be the first in his kingdom”? Is their ambition such that they can mould it to fit the social profile of a child?

ii

James may appear to be condemning all ambition, but is he not rather decrying “selfish ambition” (James 3:14)? I presume there is ambition that is not necessarily “selfish”: Although all ambition walks a fine line between what is healthy motivation and what is envy for another person’s authority.

The danger with ambition is that it is inevitably about “me”, it is intrinsically “selfish” to a degree, as it pushes us to seek the most effective position from which we can make our contribution, but a total lack of ambition is equally harmful. Without any ambition, workers can become dull, unmotivated and lacking in drive and ingenuity.

Many of us will know how frustrating it is to work for a boss who is no longer interested, who is biding time waiting for retirement, or a boss who is too timid to make any decision and ducks all the difficult decisions and leaves them to subordinates to shoulder.

Weak leadership through a total lack of ambition is harmful to an organisation, including the Church.

The Church needs people who are ambitious for the kingdom, ambitious for Christ and are highly motivated people who will push themselves and others to achieve things in the face of oppression or secular apathy. Our natural drive to seek the best that we can be can be harnessed by the Holy Spirit so that it does not just promote selfish gain, but uses that natural drive to seek the best for the Church and for those the Church seeks to support.

iii

Having said what a Spirit-led ambition may offer that is good for the Church we have all witnessed times when ambition has been of the “selfish” kind of which *James* warns us and which the disciples had presumably been exhibiting on the road..

We all know of parishes that have been ruined by preening, self-important pastors who are fired by their ambition to “get to the top”, using appointments and people as mere stepping stones to their ambitions. There are still too many instances where clergy talk as if you’ve only made it once you become a bishop, or who bully their parish councils as if they had been appointed lord of the manor, rather than leader of the servants of God.

On the other hand, many of us will no doubt have come across pastors who believe being nice to everyone rates above all else.

The harm such vacuous forms of leadership inflict upon the Church is more gradual than the bullying type, but over time things drift, stagnate and the leadership vacuum is filled by the local with the strongest personality. But unlike a bullying pastor who will eventually move on, a bullying lay person can often take hold of a parish and stay put.

In such situations you find the tragic truth that those keeping the church alive are at the same time also keeping it empty.

Perhaps the old Greek story of *Daedalus & Icarus* offers us some wise counsel concerning ambition.

Daedalus and his son Icarus were imprisoned in the labyrinth as punishment for allowing a prisoner, Theseus, to escape. However, Daedalus found a way of escape by collecting birds’ feathers and making wings for himself and Icarus.

Before they fly to freedom, Daedalus warns Icarus: “Do not fly too low – or the sea spray will soak your wings and make them too heavy to fly. But do not fly too high – or the sun will melt the wax holding the feathers in place and the wings will melt and you’ll fall into the sea.”

As we know, Icarus soon forgot his father’s advice and rather enjoyed his sense of freedom and power to soar high into the sky. His wings began to melt and Icarus fell into the sea.

A more Christian way of putting it would be to baptise your ambition with the Spirit of humility and put it at the service of Christ, who though he was the equal of God, did not consider it something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant” (Philippians 2:6-7).

As Jesus said as he washed his disciples’ feet, “no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him (John 13:16).

On that day as they walked through Galilee when they argued about who should be the greatest in the new kingdom, they still had a lot to learn about “holy” ambition. Subsequent events tell us that despite this unpromising start, the disciples did eventually learn the lesson and followed their Master to the cross.

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