

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 23rd September 2018
James 3: 13 - 4: 3, 7 - 8a; Mark 9: 30 - 37

Given up to be killed and then to rise again sounds frightening and confusing. In the Gospel reading this morning Jesus told his disciples that he was,

"...to be given up into the power of men, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."¹

That God's anointed on earth, his Chosen One, his Messiah, the Christ should be saying this - that he was to be given up to be killed, and then to rise again, silenced Jesus' disciples for they did not understand this frightening and dramatic piece of news. But, most importantly, the reading from our Gospel this morning says, they 'were too afraid to ask'.²

'But they did not understand what he said, and were afraid to ask.'

This week while I was preparing for this sermon I was wondering to myself why Jesus' disciples were too afraid to ask when they didn't understand what he was talking about. Why would someone, when he or she hears something important and frightening that they don't understand, be too afraid to ask, and to find out more?

I was wondering this while I was standing in the kitchen at home making a cup of tea, with the radio on beside me broadcasting the News. Can people be too afraid to find out more when they hear something that they don't understand and that sounds frightening? As I was thinking this, I instinctively reached out my hand and turned off the radio, as I have been doing for some time now whenever I hear a news bulletin about Brexit.

Can people be too afraid to find out more when they hear something that they don't understand and that sounded a bit frightening?

If Brexit sounds to me too frightening and too complicated to understand, so much so that I prefer to turn the News off rather than listen to it to find out more, no wonder, when Jesus started talking about arrest, execution, and resurrection, were his friends silent because they were too afraid to ask what he was talking about.

I imagine that there are all sorts of times when we are too afraid to ask; times when instinctively we feel that we would rather not know, perhaps in order to protect ourselves from that moment when we have to engage with reality, the truth, the knowledge of what has happened or what is about to happen, as if not knowing is able to ward off the inevitable. We might be silent, for example, when a doctor is going to give us very bad news about our health; or a policeman arrives at our door; or something as inconsequential as believing everyone else understands, but by asking, all we are be doing is showing up our own stupidity.

¹ Mark 9: 31

² 9: 32

Like many people who don't understand, who won't ask, and who want to put off the inevitable, instead of speaking up and asking questions, these disciples carried on as normal, as if nothing had changed - pretty much what I imagine I'll be doing right up to the morning of the 29th of March next year, the day the United Kingdom leaves the European Union.

Carrying on as normal for the disciples meant talking about how much they might benefit personally from their association with Jesus. This interest in their own personal advantage became so much of an obsession for them that they not only wondered about how much they could gain, but who amongst them might gain the most. During the journey, Mark, the Gospel writer says that, 'they had been discussing who was the greatest.'³

But, they were plunged once again into the silence of not asking when Jesus realised what they were talking about, just as people are today who are caught out talking about their personal ambition and how they might gain personally during a time of crisis. Seeking personal gain in a crisis might be what some do amongst those who want to live in a United Kingdom freshly set free from the European Union, but seeking personal gain in a crisis is not what people do who want to be set free to live in the Kingdom of God.

If today's readings teach us anything, it is to be wary of those in positions of power and influence who seek to gain from what looks and sounds like a crisis that no one fully understands.

'If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all.'⁴ Jesus sat his disciples down, literally the text says, and told them that if you want this world to be a world where the God of love and peace and mercy and justice reigns, then you cannot build that Kingdom, or any state or business or institution or family on the back of your personal ambition either as an individual or as a country. For example, Jesus would go on to tell his disciples that for Judaism as a religion its strength of community would not depend upon the beauty and magnificence of the greatest temple the world has ever seen.

Whether it was the Roman history of Jesus' day or British history in later days, we know now that you cannot rely on the power and the extent of your nation's empire to deliver long term security, stability and identity never mind a state of love, peace, justice and mercy for everyone. That is why the Kingdom of God is built on serving others, not being served by others. "'If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all.'"⁵

In Jesus Christ, who by being given over to the power of men and killed made himself the last of all, the servant of all, God showed us that the world we all want to live in is created by a God who on this earth suffers the most, endures, and is able to rise from the tomb to live on for the sake, not just of those who would follow

³ Mark 9: 34

⁴ Mark 9: 35

⁵ Mark 9: 35

after Him and believe in him, but for those who would otherwise be utterly powerless in this world just as he had made himself powerless, like, for example children were powerless in the first century, or indeed too often like children still are today.

When trying to build a new world, a new country, a new life, it is always too easy to aim for greatness and to forget why the project needs to be undertaken in the first place, and for whom.

The disciples' folly in seeking greatness, and Jesus' demonstration of taking a child, the least powerful member of society to show them where true greatness lies is as much a lesson to us today, that real life, whole life, holy life, enduring life, new life that rises again and lives on, is not built on the ambitions of politicians in Parliament to become Prime Minister; or on the ambitions of teachers in schools to become school heads or directors of education; or on ministers' in churches to have the largest or the wealthiest congregations; or on managers in businesses to have the best return on shareholders' capital; or on civil servants in governments to climb the greasy pole; or on those with the most power in our families to ensure they get what they want out of life.

Real life, whole life, holy life, enduring life, new life that rises again, and lives on is instead built on identifying who it is that needs served, who is most likely not to be served in this world, and paying attention to them: politicians should be in it for the poorest, the weakest; teachers for children; businesses should be in business as much for those who do the work as for those who pay the money or supply the capital; ministers aren't in pulpits for the opportunity to say what they think, but to help congregations understand more and better the faith they hold, and the Bible they read.

What was true in Jesus' day, and what is true in the world today is true also of us here in St. Ninian's. Whatever we as a congregation want to achieve, it will only be achievable if it is built upon our ability and willingness to serve one another, and to serve in particular those who are the weakest, have the greatest needs, or the quietest voices.

The Scottish Government set 2018 aside as a Year of Young People, and the Church of Scotland has supported that as a way of helping us all to recognise the importance of building our society and our church on the basis of serving those whose voices are too often not heard, or who are too afraid to ask.

It is pleasing that in St. Ninian's young people have had more a voice this year, at least in worship. And, it is not just young people who are often denied a voice in churches, other are as well, so it is important to offer you a voice too, the opportunity to ask questions about anything you don't understand, so that worship in St. Ninian's doesn't just become a pulpit for my opinions.

In the Kingdom of God, people are called to ask questions and to seek to understand the challenging sometimes frightening Gospel of Jesus Christ that turns

the world on its head and builds it for those who are too often not heard, or not seen, or not acknowledged.

Life in God's Kingdom, wherever that is being built: within or without Europe; within or without the church, is a team sport where everyone has a role, not a race where there can only be one winner.