

## Highfield Rd Uniting Church

### They did not understand

Mark 9:30 - 37

Many of you would have heard of this new social phenomenon called ‘cancel culture’. Actors fired for Twitter posts, movies or TV shows being shunned because, “we don’t like their attitude”. It’s actually not new, just a new name and a zealous attitude born of social media. Rather than being honoured for their talents, people are being shamed and shunned for their opinions. This is a modern expression of the Mediterranean culture of 2000 years ago, not just Rome but all the cultures that the Empire touched, that ran on honour and shame. Status was of the highest importance; you must garner the honour of the world to succeed. To the extent that humility, compassion, and mercy were thought of as weakness. You would be shamed for associating with those of lower status. And that is an important background to this little episode of Jesus having a private teaching time with the disciples. The disciples were captured by the idea that they were the close cohort of the Messiah! Such honour! They were destined to be important people. And then Jesus tells them that he is to be handed over and killed! Such shame! Is it any wonder that they didn’t understand? And the depth of their lack of understanding is shown in the discussion on the road. They were dazzled by the idea of status and honour as the disciples of the Messiah. But who had the greatest honour? What was to be the pecking order in the new kingdom? They hadn’t grasped what the new kingdom was actually about, and they needed a lesson about the kingdom of God in which honour is replaced by humility, and status by service.



The image of Jesus embracing a small child, and calling the disciples to welcome children, dominates our reading of this important lesson for the disciples. It was difficult to find an image for this story that didn’t have a group of mothers and children gathered around Jesus. However, we need to be careful that

it’s not just stroking our modern, somewhat romantic, view of children. To better understand this lesson in the radical, upside-down nature of the kingdom, we need to consider that culture of the first century to grasp the scandalous nature of Jesus’ action.

“To grasp the full force of this action on Jesus’ part we have to put aside the idealization of childhood that arose in the nineteenth century. In the ancient world children were precious, no doubt, to their parents, but they had no social status or value whatever; until adulthood they were nobodies.

Brendan Byrne, *“A Costly Freedom – A Theological Commentary on Mark”*

This is not a reading that should cause us to start singing “Jesus loves the little children”. Jesus didn’t use a child as an example to teach the disciples to welcome children, he was teaching them to invert their understanding of status. The Greek word for ‘little children’ is a close linguistic match for a word for a household servant, and so, in embracing a little child and telling the disciples to be the servant of all meant that, like slaves and little children, you had to wait for everyone else to be fed before you could eat. In the kingdom of God, we are not called to court the honour of people in high

status and power, we are called to welcome and serve people of low status, and indeed, those of no status.

Those disciples trying to follow Jesus didn't understand this huge shift in culture and attitude that the kingdom of God was calling for. The depth of their struggle to understand is shown by the same lesson being repeated time and again. Each time Jesus tells them the path is towards suffering and death - shame - the disciples don't understand and talk about glory and honour. First Peter who rebukes Jesus for talking about death, then this story of who is the greatest, and in a couple of chapters the sons of Zebedee want to be on Jesus left and right. However, Mark didn't include these stories to embarrass the disciples, the lesson had to carry on to the next generation of disciples and the next. The upside-down kingdom - the first shall be last and the last first - will always be at odds with the surrounding culture of honour, status, influence, and wealth. It's not just the disciples who didn't understand or accept Jesus' teaching, the seductive call to honour and status and acceptance has corrupted the Gospel throughout the history of the church.

The earliest church history was written by a man called Eusebius, and he finished his history with Constantine's embrace of Christianity because he saw that as the high point, the culmination of the kingdom. Many today see it as the low point, the moment when the church started to court honour and power and status and the corruption of Christendom where people's lives, and even nations, became controlled by priests and bishops, instead of those priests and bishops serving the needs of people. But there have been bright spots when Jesus' teaching has been heard again.

Francis of Assisi understood what Jesus was talking about, but his embrace of poverty and service was a threat to the rich and powerful bishops who courted the favour of princes. Making Francis a saint and authorising the Franciscan Order wasn't about honour or support, it was silencing Francis by normalising the call to poverty and service as just one thread of the great tapestry of theology.

The great social revolutions of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries that were driven by people of faith included the rise of Sunday Schools. But that was not because those people of faith - Robert Raikes, John Wesley, William Wilberforce etc - thought that Jesus was teaching his disciples to embrace children. They were *Sunday Schools* because children were of such low status that they were trapped in child labour; Sunday was their day off! And the scheme of education was driven by the desire to reduce the suffering of young people ending up in prison. Yes, it was about children, but they were not the only ones of low status. The lesson in inverting honour did not just lead to Sunday Schools, it also led to the abolition of slavery, to the formation of unions, and an end to workhouses among other social advances.

So, who are the people of low status, or no status, that we are called to embrace? Who is being excluded in our culture of wealth, consumerism, beauty, and technology? The homeless? The mentally ill? The aged? Those of diverse gender and sexuality? The disabled? The refugees? The lonely? Or is it more a lesson about forgetting categories and classifications, and living for the needs and welfare of whoever you meet and welcome? Maybe Jesus is calling us to live the life of the 'servant of all' at all times and all situations.

In the midst of our community of faith, let us bring in those who the world has rejected, and we are tempted to reject, to remind us of the upside-down kingdom of God that we are called to, a kingdom of humility and service, to cancel the culture of honour and shame.