

Do you have what it takes?
(Mark 9:30-37)

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Mark 9:30-37

From there, Jesus and those who were with him, went through Galilee, but Jesus didn't want anyone to know it, because he was teaching those who were learning from him. He was saying to them: "The Son of Man will be handed over into the hands of men who will kill him; but three days after they have killed him, he will arise." They didn't know what he was saying, but they were too afraid to ask him about it.

Then he came to Capharnaum. When he had come to the house, he asked them: "What were you discussing on the road?" But, they were silent, because on the road they had been arguing with each other as to who was the greatest. So, Jesus sat down and called the 12 and said to them: "If anyone wants to be Number One, he will be the Last one and the servant of all the others." Then Jesus took an infant and placed it in the midst of them. He took it in his arms and said to them: "Whoever welcomes an infant like this in my name, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, does not welcome me but rather the one who sent me."

I imagine that most of you have children. My wife and I rejoiced that we were able to be at our daughter Julia's second child's birth just minutes after it had happened. And we have watched little George and his older brother Eddie grow. They're really amazing.

But, one thing that's not so wonderful about infants is when they cry. Did you know that a baby's cry is well above the decibels of your alarm clock or telephone and just below the noise level of an ambulance, a jack-hammer, or an airplane taking off. Amazing, isn't it? That means that you can hear a baby crying full out from a long ways away! That will get your attention.

In the days of Jesus, in the lands around Israel, from the farthest Roman colony in Spain, through Rome and Greece, all the way to the Greek and Roman colonies in the Middle East that sound filled the night. Yes, it came in some cases from homes, where the baby was picked up and fed or cared for by mothers or by slaves who nursed the infant. But, in many, many other cases it came from the dark forests and rocky valleys where infants had been brought to be left there and exposed to the elements and to die. No one was there to pick up these infants who wailed and screamed at the top of their lungs. But they were heard. You could hear it far away, especially at night. How far away can you hear sounds at night: that train, that coyote, that plane overhead...? Oh, yes, people could hear very well the sound of infants left to be exposed to the elements and die because they were unwanted by their families. And yet no one did anything about it. It was just accepted. This was the world into which Jesus came.

In fact, in Jesus' day, there were at least 2 other groups of people who could be treated in a similar way as infants, though never perhaps quite as callously: slaves and women.

Slaves were property, though there were limits on what you could do with property, just as there is today with what you can do with an unborn child or an infant... though these boundaries are changing very, very quickly. Today, you cannot throw your rubbish beside the road; in Jesus' day, you couldn't simply wound or kill your slave, unless you had a good reason to do so. But, if you had good reason, you could harm or kill your slave with the full impunity of the law.

Women were perhaps the group that was the most likely to be treated with care because, like slaves, they were necessary for the care of the house but unlike slaves they were even more required since they were the means by which men would have children as heirs. But, still, women could be treated and were treated like a kind of chattel, the Old English word for property, from which our modern English word, "cattle", comes. You took care of your property but disposed of it when it was appropriate to do so. The Old Testament, like Roman law, sought to control that treatment. But like so many things, law can help control a problem, like anger, but it cannot remove the problem itself.

That changed with the incarnation of our Lord, who changed the heart, not just the actions of the body. And so it is that those of us living 2000 years later, 2000 years during which the Gospel has taken deep root in our culture and lives and has changed us profoundly, are shocked by the kinds of things that I have just said about women, slaves, and babies. But, you must remember that things were not always as they are now. There was a time before the Gospel. And this is the world into which Jesus came. One of the reasons why many of us take the Gospel for granted -- which is actually a form of blasphemy -- is because we do not realize what things were like before the Gospel changed them.

And so it was that, in this world of male supremacy, in which infants that were unwanted could be disposed of: slaves and women who had displeased their masters could be legally disposed of, Jesus one day took just that kind of disposable being, an infant -- not a child, which means a boy or girl who has survived the first years of infancy and will probably now go on to grow up -- but a baby, whether a boy or girl -- we don't know because Mark says "it", not "he" or "she" -- who may or may not live to see tomorrow, or who may not be allowed to live to see tomorrow -- and hugs that baby and turns to the 12 men who were with him and says to them: 'Look at this baby here in my arms. If you also receive and make a place for a little baby like this in my name, you will also be receiving me and making a place for me; and if you do that for me, I can tell you that you won't be receiving me but rather receiving God the Father who sent me and making a place for Him.'

Yes, it all starts with this little, disposable piece of flesh that I am holding in my arms. Which is, after all, where we all start!

What is this all about?

Remember the scene. While Jesus and his students -- that's the better word to use for the word that you often find translated "disciple", which in the Greek means someone who is learning

something from a teacher, that is, “students” -- Jesus and his students had been making their way through Galilee to the seaside town of Capharnaum. As they journeyed, they had been talking among themselves about greatness. They knew Jesus to be on his way to Jerusalem and had by now come to believe that this Jesus was the political leader that they called the “Messiah” and that this Messiah was, according to all expectations derived from the Old Testament, going to seize power from the wicked Gentiles who ruled in Jerusalem and set up the new Kingdom of God about which he had been teaching. So, along the road, through Galilee, with this last stop in Capharnaum before they head south toward Jerusalem, the men among these students who were following Jesus from town to town started to dispute with each other which of them would be called “great” when they got to Jerusalem. Which of them would be Minister of Finance in the Kingdom, which Minister of War, which Minister of State, which Minister of the Temple. And which of these would be the greatest of all roles?

It hadn't mattered to them that Jesus had been teaching all of the students during their journey now for a second time what lay before him in Jerusalem. He had not said a word about going to Jerusalem to seize power. Rather, he said, he was going to Jerusalem to die. He told them plainly: "The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise."

This was the second time he had said this. Do you remember the first time that he had told them this? It was in the previous chapter, immediately after one of the 12, Peter, had confessed Jesus to be the coming King. But then, after hearing Jesus say to them that what being the Anointed One meant was that he was going to suffer, Peter had taken Jesus aside and tried to teach the teacher, Jesus, that this was not the way things were supposed to go. Rather, Jesus was supposed to go to Jerusalem to seize power... and then of course Peter and the others would be there to pick up the pieces and assume their greatness.

You also hopefully remember Jesus' response to Peter at that point. Jesus looked at Peter, and then at the 12, and said to Peter: 'You think like a man. And you're trying to get me to think and act like a man. That's the work of Satan. So, Peter, all I can say to you at this point is that you're no better than Satan; so, get out of my way.'

At that point, after the first statement by Jesus about why he was going to Jerusalem, he had then gone on to tell the whole crowd, along with all those who were learning from Jesus, that they should think twice about becoming his followers, because to become Jesus' follower meant eventually following him along the same path that would lead to the cross in Jerusalem.

They had no idea what he was talking about, other than to think: 'Yeah, you know he's right: If we are expecting to get to Jerusalem and the Romans will lay down their weapons before we seize power, we're wrong. We need to realize that there will be a fight and that people will get hurt when we try to seize power from the Romans. But, that shouldn't detract us from our goal. Let's go on with him!' At which point, cheers would have gone up from the crowd: 'God is great! Down with the Romans! Jesus is our King!'

I can only imagine Jesus watching this cheering mob, hanging his head, and praying to his Father: Will they ever really understand who I am?

But now, this second time Jesus does not speak to the whole crowd, or even to the larger group of people who were following him and listening carefully to what he taught. This time he draws the 12 aside and speaks to them privately, to these 12 men that he had chosen specifically to be with him and to whom he had already given his power to do the same kinds of things that he had been doing: freeing people from the chains of sickness and Satan and teaching them about the coming Kingdom of God.

Why?

Jesus took the 12 aside for a very clear reason. They were supposed to be those who were most closely associated with Jesus during this training period because they were the ones who were designated to take over from Jesus when he was arrested, killed, and then, raised from the dead to sit at God's right hand. These 12 were to become the model for the church of what the kingdom of God was to be. And what was that? It was to be a kingdom in which all of those who were subject to the powers of this world had been freed by God to become what God had always intended them to be. This included the sick and the possessed. And it included all those disposable humans who had become subservient to the corrupt desires of men: infants, and slaves, and women. And it is built around these 12 who are nothing in the world's eyes -- illiterate farmers of the sea. Is it in them that God the Father is going to do an absolutely amazing work.

So, Jesus says to the 12: Let me give you a model of what you are supposed to be. And so he takes a defenceless and disposable infant and he says: Look. There it is. That's your model.

Huh? What do you mean? You can't build an institution on the basis of disposable babies... anymore than you could on slaves or women?

Jesus doesn't respond to this, but the whole of orthodox Christian theology does, from the letters of the apostle Paul, through the Gospels and the other texts of the New Testament, all the way into the writings of those who plumbed the depths of Scripture to see what Jesus was talking about. And what Jesus was talking about was this:

The Church is not to become another human institution based on the power and influence and greatness that people bring to it. Nor is it to be based on those who, once transformed, use their authority the way it is used in the world.

The Church is to be made up of people who are rejected by the world and who are counted as nothing in the world's eyes, but who, by God's grace and God's power, are shown to be the very vessels of God's grace and power, through whom God's love and transforming power pour forth into this corrupt age to draw others who are nothing to Himself. And it is precisely because this will happen through those who are nothing that the world will stop and look and say: 'Who are these people? Where did they get this wisdom? Where did they get this power?' Just as they did with Jesus!

This is why my church, Jesus said, is built not on the foundation of man but on the foundation of God, and it is made up not of marvelous stones, great stones, powerful stones, but of those who are nothing in and of themselves and who are only what they are by the power of God.

And to those who would be leaders in the church, direct successors of the apostles through teaching the Word entrusted to them or enacting it in the life of the church, remember that it was to you that this message was first entrusted and it is up to you faithfully to communicate it regularly to the church. The failure of leaders in the church to heed the teaching of Jesus is one of the things that has led people still today to dispute on the road who is the greatest. It is up to you to remind the church regularly what it means to be a member of the church of God: it is not greatness that is required.

Rather the question leaders need to be posing to us regularly is: do you have what it takes ... that is, do you have the Spirit of God to make of you, weak and sinful as you are, something that you can never be in and of yourself? Do you have what it takes... the Spirit of God, to step back from your human goals and say: All that I have, Lord, comes from you and I have nothing of my own to offer you? Do you have what it takes, the Spirit of God, who alone can bring you to say: Use me to your glory and so transform the world.¹

Notes

J. Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

¹ It is interesting to note that the early Christian church became the first organized group of people in the Graeco-Roman world to do something about the “exposure” of infants (i.e., the practice of leaving children in the wilds to die). For a fuller study of how this happened, see (Boswell 1988). Suffice it to say here that the reading of this text from Mark had a significant role in shifting the view that “exposure” was normal to a view in which Christ came for and died for “the least”, including dispensable infants, slaves, and women.