

Twenty Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time 2018
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James 3:17-4:3

Mark 9:30-37

The first time I arrived in Oxford, I came as a tourist. My experience was of high walls, closed doors, and a system designed at every point to illustrate your rank—or in my case, my lack of rank in the Oxford hierarchy. My welcome from Oxonians could not even be called cold—it was non-existent. I was an outsider, a nobody. I didn't like it. Part of me wanted to wash my hands of the whole system. But another part of me also wanted to find a way into that inner circle—to find myself admitted to the closed colleges, the high tables, the invitation-only gatherings. I could see myself wearing a long gown with sleeves swishing around me as I strode down cobblestone streets. (For the record, I never imagined myself in a cassock) I hated having no status. I wanted to be on the inside.

In our Gospel reading today, we find the disciples fighting over rank. Already admitted into Jesus' inner circle, they still argue over who is the greatest. It seems that there is no circle that is "inner-enough" to satisfy. Jesus, noticing the squabbling, calls them to order, and asks them what they were discussing. I can imagine the scene: Jesus stands as a mother lining up her children, asking who stole cookies from the cookie jar. As with children, an embarrassed silence is all he gets from the disciples. Jesus sits down to teach and begins, once again, to repeat the upside-down values of the Kingdom of God. The first is last, the last is first. The greatest is the servant of all. Throughout all four gospels, Jesus says the same thing repeatedly in different ways. "Take up your cross" not "take up your sword." Blessed are the meek,

the poor, the peacemakers. Do not store up riches on earth, where rust and moth destroy. You must be born again. Perhaps Jesus learned it from his mother, the words of the Magnificat echoing through the stories of his birth: “God has shown strength with his arm: he has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their seats and has exalted the humble and meek.” But, despite the repeated lessons, the disciples just don’t get it. In fact, they don’t really understand very much of Jesus’s mission at all.

The passage we heard begins with Jesus predicting his death. A chapter earlier, in Mark 8, when Jesus predicted his death the first time, Peter took him aside to berate him. “Rabbi, teacher, you’re getting it wrong.” This time, although they don’t actively dismiss his teaching, they simply won’t admit that they don’t understand it. Take a moment and enjoy irony of this moment. Jesus is giving them access to the great secret of who he actually is, and they won’t take advantage of his invitation. Jesus opens up the inner circle, and they stand outside too proud to ask what he means. They walk along the road, literally walking “on the way of Jesus”, but they have forgotten Jesus, and are puzzling about pecking order. “On the way” of Jesus, their hearts are busy following another way.

So, Jesus tries again to get through to them, calling a child amongst them, saying “whoever receives one such child in my name receives me”. Now, our imaginations are so full of Victorian romance, that when we think of children, we think of innocence or an unspoiled nature, the seed of all our future hopes. Children have great status in our culture. The first century was not so sentimental. Children had no social standing. They had no legal rights. They were not innocents, they were non-entities. It is

possible that Jesus was making a play on words—in the Aramaic Jesus spoke, “servant” and “child” are the same word—by embracing the child he is embracing the servant.

I was trying to think of an equivalent in our day to the child in the first century. You’d think it would be easy. Oxford is explicitly a place where status matters. For those of you involved with the university, you know exactly what is being asked when someone inquires what college you are a part of. Every aspect of college life, except for a few of the modern colleges, is dominated by your rank. Where you can go, what you eat, what you wear. And all the hierarchy, all the status, is ruled by a strict code of cultural uniformity that determines whether you are an insider, outsider, or where in between those two you fit. These were all things made evident in my first, tourist, visit. Oxford can be wonderfully inclusive at times. When it comes to LGBTQ issues, for example, it is hugely affirming, and the rainbow flag is flown from virtually every college. That is good. But nonconformity in other matters of “insider culture” is strictly policed. Just try calling the Long Vac the Summer Break. Or mention that someone came down to Oxford from Scotland and see how long it takes for people to correct you into the “proper” Oxford way that one always comes “up” to Oxford, no matter their geographical reference. How many listening to me, I wonder, felt the urge to correct me when earlier I said “cookies” and not “biscuits”? Those who are on the inside in Oxford speak the right way.

When I came to Oxford as a tourist, I was reminded of what it is to be a person of no rank, no status, no importance. I was simply an obstacle on the pavements. It was no comment on my real worth or value, nor on any visitor who comes, but reflected a

rotten aspect of the local culture. A few years later I came up to Oxford from Exeter to take a job: I became an insider. Oxford has been home to me longer than anywhere else I've lived apart from my hometown. But I've never forgotten that first impression, and a passage like today's brings me to reflect once again on how I treat strangers and visitors to our city. It is a spiritual touchstone throughout my day just to notice how I feel about the crowds, and a daily practice to cultivate hospitality.

Our reading from James reinforces the same message "Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice." The pretensions of ambition are contrasted with real wisdom: the wisdom that sees the value of the child, the stranger, the servant, which is "gentle, full of mercy, without uncertainty or insincerity."

As I prepared this, a single image got stuck in my mind as a sort of parable of the twin dangers of where the practice of humility gets twisted. The picture was from *Pride and Prejudice*: the characters of Mr Collins and Lady Catherine de Burgh. You will remember Mr Collins's ostentatious and obsequious "humility", his obsession with propriety, pursued no doubt in the attempt to be an ideal clergyman. And Lady Catherine's famed "condescension", her self-aggrandizing and invasive way of showing that no thing was so humble that it should evade her thought and action: even down to shelves in the cupboards of other people's homes. These are pictures of the pretence of humility. True humility is much less flashy.

Our goal, as ever, is to treat others as God in Christ has treated us. We love because God first loved us. We were strangers to grace and were welcomed in to God's

Kingdom. It is our honour and our privilege to extend that welcome to others: rich and poor, stranger and friend. Beginning with the needy, the clueless, the broken, the unfashionable: in short, beginning with myself. Receiving God's welcome, I can extend it to others.