

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: January 27th: Mark 9:30-50: Some Notes

A plain statement about the future. As often with bad news, the disciples feel this is too much information, and don't want to clarify. Maybe partly because of the threat of Jesus not being around, the disciples turn to discussing quietly among themselves who will be in charge. They are very embarrassed when Jesus picks up on their conversation. Jesus talks about leading and serving, with a child as a visual aid. A sharp lesson about insiders and outsiders follows. Misuse of power is roundly condemned: it means taking it out on the most vulnerable because they are vulnerable. A collection of pithy sayings: collected together but not necessarily given by Jesus in a single lesson. Lessons here for Christians individually, and for the church collectively. Mark's Roman audience knew about (house) churches which were rather cliquey. (If the church meets in your house, it is very easy to start excluding people who "aren't quite one of us".) As with the failure to heal the "epileptic" boy, the world not un-naturally judges the Church by its activities more than by its sermons.

From our vantage point, it might seem odd that the disciples could fail to understand a straightforward statement about death and life. But (a) death was not what they wanted to hear; (b) the disciples were used to "simple" Jesus statements having hidden meanings; (c) the standard thinking about the Messiah didn't include death of the Messiah; (d) resurrection was everybody at the end of time, not one person in the foreseeable future.

The leadership debate: I chaired the Civil Service Selection Board for a short time, and, earlier on, chaired many Departmental selection boards. We were often looking for leadership qualities, because being in a senior post means having staff to lead. Jesus in due course appointed Peter as a leader; and I don't think He is saying that He is looking out for people who, when leadership is needed, hurriedly say "Not me, mate!" Jesus Himself was very much the Leader; but a Servant Leader. There are situations in which someone needs to take charge; and groups and countries need leaders. But what is needed is a leader who is not in it for him or herself, but someone who is in it for us, all of us – and especially the most vulnerable of us. As the hymn puts it, we are called to follow and (humbly) emulate the Servant King.

The stark language of the chopping off bits of the body passage has sometimes been taken literally. If you find yourself inclined to say nasty things about people, get a knife and..... But that example shows up the reality that surgical intervention isn't the real point. If you did cut your tongue out, you could still write unkind things; and if you got the knife out again, you could still think unkind things..... Much better to get a grip on yourself than to take a knife to yourself.

The concluding salt collection is turned by the Message version into a very neat unified message about principles and priorities. Interesting to see what each of us makes of it.