



21 October 2012
The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity
Sung Eucharist
Hebrews 5 vv. 1–10
Mark 10 vv. 35–45

The Stubbornness of Learning

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There are those terrible moments as a lecturer or teacher when you realise that you have failed: The realisation often comes when you are marking exams and, you think, something like 'but that's precisely what I didn't say; I was clear; this is the exact opposite; how did they not grasp that'.

But of course the process of teaching is not just about imparting information or even knowledge, it is also about breaking down assumptions or frameworks of understanding that people have. Teaching and learning involves dismantling; a certain sort of 'undoing' and 'unknowing'. When people haven't grasped something, it isn't simply that they haven't listened, but rather that they haven't fully understand, haven't 'taken on board' the implications.

This stubbornness, inertia or resistance to understanding something new is a challenge well known to the biblical writers. So there is a refrain in the Old Testament in which the people of Israel are described as a 'stiff-necked' people: obstinate and uncomprehending; they simply don't understand and therefore can't receive what God wishes to give them by way of his blessing; they listen, but do not hear; they see, but do not perceive.

This morning's reading provides consolation for teachers everywhere: For Christ himself seems to have failed big time: Two of his key followers, his best students, James and John, couldn't have got it more wrong despite a range of teaching techniques in which Jesus' words have been reinforced with actions – in the passages immediately preceding our reading, Jesus has on several occasions placed children (seen as marginal to society) at the heart of his teaching, making it clear that they and not the disciples or the Pharisees or anyone else most effectively embody the nature of the kingdom which must be entered with the dependence and humility of the child-like. AND STILL, – despite all his efforts, James and John simply haven't got it, they try to assert themselves by making a bid for the 'power and the glory', without the foggiest idea what that might involve.

It is of course easy to marvel at the stupidity of these two disciples, yet the reality is that it is extremely difficult to throw off worldly ideas of what power and authority look like. We are all, I would suggest, extremely obstinate pupils in this regard; all seeking to manipulate God to our own ends.

Our epistle reading offers a striking counter-example, and some hope - for here, the authority of Christ is described as being like that of the High priest, who is able to 'deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness', the High Priest is only able to 'be in charge' because of his awareness of his own weakness and sin.



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‘The idea that a leader might be great, or that authority might be exercised by one, whose central qualification is that he or she is someone who is most aware of their own shortcomings and as a result most capable of dealing with ‘the ignorant and the wayward’ seems quite extraordinary: On the face of it, it doesn’t make sense to us, for it requires of us a very significant unlearning, an unknowing of what we thought we knew about power and the exercise of power. And yet, I would suggest, it is a central feature of the most productive forms of human leadership.

Let us pray:

May we, O Lord, strive to unlearn the ways of the world, seek you as the only Teacher of our souls and pursue humility in all we think and say and do, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen