

Sunday 20th September 2009: Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity

Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all

Readings: James 3.13-4.3, 7-8a; Mark 9.30-37

In the documentary feature film *Blind Sight* which some of us saw last week a group of blind Tibetan children climb the 23,000 Lhakpa Ri on the north side of Mount Everest. A few hundred feet or so from its peak, the team around them led by two blind adult climbers, one from Germany and one from the USA, and other sighted climbers decide to call it a day. Although exhilarated the children don't all have the energy to make it to the top. Instead they reach what is known as the ice palace, a beautifully carved natural wall of sculptures. For these children this is their summit, their Everest. The sounds of breaking stalactite icicles, the feel of the shapes and forms of the ice are magical to them. They are beaming, riding the ice like it's an elephant, fighting one another with ice swords. The American team – conditioned to making it to the top, to conquer, to being first – have learnt something from these children about what success means.

A few months before, each of these children were living in villages throughout Tibet (where blindness is seen as a stigma) outcasts of their society; parents ashamed, some to the point of abandoning them or selling them to act as beggars. The real journey of their climb, made possible through the blind school (Braille Without Borders) that each had started attending, is one towards self-esteem and confidence, most for the first time feeling what it is like to be valued *just for who they are*. Not despised, rejected and ashamed because of what they are not.

This story resonates with what Jesus is trying to teach his disciples in our Gospel today as they vie with one another about who is the greatest, perhaps who is able to be his representative. It is through valuing and recognising the non-person that he is to be welcomed. He takes a child and sets it amongst them. With our contemporary western understanding of childhood it is hard to appreciate the effect this would have had on the disciples. Childhood in ancient times was not a romanticised time of innocence to be protected. A child was insignificant, without legal status or dignity. Jesus tells them that to be the greatest they have to serve the least. That *it is in* the lowliest, the one without status or value, the not-yet-person, the excluded, the ignored and the invisible that he will be welcomed. It challenges all their ideas of status and power and greatness. To be the greatest they are being called to serve the lowest person and to receive them – this nobody – or in Tibetan terms 'this blind child' – in his name. I wonder who that person is for us?

One can imagine how easy it would have been for the disciples to find themselves vying for position as male protégés of a powerful teacher. There has been both success and failure in their ministry and there is plenty to divide them. They have had some success in casting out demons and healing when they are sent out on mission. Failure when they find they are unable to cast out a demon from a young boy because of lack of prayer. When Peter and James and John are selected to accompany Jesus alone up the mountain and witness his transfiguration, others are left behind. Peter seems to get it right when he recognises Jesus as the Messiah but in the next moment fails to understand the suffering that this will involve or the glory to come.

In the tension between their successes and their failures, and in their lack of understanding about Jesus' teaching, the disciples cannot help but fall back on worldly values to distinguish

amongst themselves. And the Gospel writers may also be saying something here to the power struggles of the early Christian community, as the structure of the church began to grow and positions and roles were adopted and assigned. Plenty of opportunity for Christian to be set against Christian. I'm sure this kind of power struggle is territory that most of us are familiar with in our own workplaces and lives.

As so often in Mark's gospel the disciples are portrayed as weak, fallible, lacking in insight and understanding. What they find hardest to grasp is that Jesus' power is to be found in weakness as well as in strength, in the powerful signs of healing and exorcism *and* in his prediction of suffering and shame. When he tells them for the second time about his forthcoming passion their response is incomprehension and silence and fear. *The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.*

Our reading today is set within a wider section of the gospel that is concerned with discipleship and understanding. Like bookends at the beginning and end are stories about the healing of blindness, a play on the disciples' understanding. When will they *see* who Jesus is and what he is teaching them.

The first healing takes place in two parts. At first the blind man's sight is partially restored so that he can see people but they look to him like trees walking. Jesus touches him again and time his eyesight is completely restored and he can see clearly. At the end of the section we hear of blind Bartimaeus who not only fully regains his sight but immediately joins Jesus on the way, recognising him as 'Son of David'.

Like the healing of the first man, our understanding or sight comes gradually. We are called and we respond. Having a glimpse of the person of Jesus, like the disciples we can't help but follow. He encourages us to act in his name. Sometimes we fail and sometimes we succeed. Like the disciples we....journey...to see who Jesus is and what he does more clearly...

Today the Living the Questions course starts here after the service, where people will share in small groups their experience and understanding of their faith. An opportunity to share glimpses of Jesus *and blindness*, and begin to ask those questions that help us to see and understand more clearly. Help one another open our eyes to the groundbreaking radical values and love of Christ.

One of the most challenging things about living the gospel is that it is never something that is external to us. In welcoming the weakest and most vulnerable, we cannot help but touch that part of ourselves. One of the hardest things I'm finding about ministering here is constantly being brought up short by the lives of those who are homeless, people struggling with weakness, addictions, and lives that have unravelled. It is an uncomfortable experience.

In seeing Jesus more clearly in those we encounter, including the outsider, the status-less and the least, he sees us more clearly. He sees the bits we are proud of – our achievements at work, our gifts and skills, our humour, our confidence perhaps – but also the ordinary and mundane things about us – and then beyond that, tucked away in the corner of our lives and hearts, the part of us *that is the outcast*, shameful and weak, that we hide from others and perhaps are afraid to acknowledge even to ourselves. Perhaps the part he most longs to meet. When we have allowed Jesus to see all of that, then we are on the way to recovering our sight of God and joining Jesus like Bartimaeus on the way.

For the blind children in the film the freedom they found was not in getting to the top of the mountain but in knowing themselves, not as outcasts but loved and cherished and valued. From this experience their lives blossomed. Kyila came to study in England and has returned to run the Braille Without Borders school. Tashi and Tenzin have set up a medical massage centre, others are leading fulfilling lives.

We're not here to vie with one another and get to the top of the mountain. We are here to find our own ice palaces in life, somewhere a bit further down. Where we can recognise and make space for those who have no place or value according to the values of the world. Where we can allow God to find and recognise that side of us. It is a place of joy and acceptance and freedom.

It is there that we will draw near to God and he will draw near to us.

He will see us as the vulnerable children we are and we will have the eyes to see and recognise that in others – in his name. And our sight will be restored.