

“CAREER CHRISTIANITY (Mark 33)”

Mark 9:30-41

A few weeks back, I was invited to a course for “Appraisers”. The Baptist Union is setting up a scheme whereby ministers can have a regular appraisal and thus try to clarify their calling and vision for the next few years, and in their folly they thought I might be useful as an appraiser. The United Reformed Church has had such a scheme for a while now and I’ve been appraised a couple of times. (On the second occasion I was told it was tiem for a sabbatical!) Many of you, I’m sure will have been through similar schemes as part of your jobs – performance management, career development interviews, professional development appraisal and so on. It’s an opportunity to reflect on where your career is going and what you need to do if you’re going to get on to the next salary scale or move up the promotion ladder.

The difficulty that some people experience with the appraisal system for ministers is that there isn’t really any career development. Ministers don’t actually get promoted, because there’s nothing really to get promoted to – especially in apparently non-hierarchical denominations such as ours. You cannot make a career out of being a Christian. In fact, for many people (particularly in other parts of the world), being a Christian can pretty well mean an end to a career. I’ve never come across anyone who has gone into Christian ministry – ordained or otherwise – for the money or the kudos or the power. Anyone who does, really doesn’t last too long! The nearest I’ve ever come to that is a friend I had at theological college – a Greek Orthodox priest we’ll call John (as that is his name). He was very well connected not only ecclesiastically, but also politically and was determined to be a bishop before he was thirty: he actually articulated that ambition and he had it all sorted out. As it happens, Orthodox bishops are taken from the monastic stream of the church, so he had to remain single and celibate. The last I heard of him, he had fallen in love and married, so bang went his career plan!

The disciples of Jesus, however, were not quite so aware of the pattern of Christian ministry. They thought there was maybe some kind of progressive career to be had in the service of Jesus. We pick up Mark’s story as Jesus begins his journey south to meet his destiny at Golgotha. Mark doesn’t actually note that, but if you read on you’ll find that the rest of the story takes place on the way to Jerusalem. And as the little band of followers joins Jesus on his journey south, Jesus continues to teach them privately. Not wanting the crucial things that he has to tell them to be interrupted by the demands of the crowds, they keep a low profile and once again Jesus points out the extent to which his mission involves suffering – and still the disciples fail to grasp what he’s saying.

In fact, their failure to understand is so comprehensive that they actually end up discussing the positions they might have in the Kingdom that Jesus has come to inaugurate. They feel they need a pecking order – as there most certainly was in the society of their day. And like there has been in pretty well every society before or since. They want to know who is going to get the key posts, just like union fixers at a conference or political apparatchiks in local and national government. It’s all about status – “*Who is the greatest?*” I remember going to a wedding in London at the church where I worked. It was an African couple who were getting married and, as well as the Best Man, the wedding traditionally had a “chairman”, someone who took the centre stage at the reception and ensured everything went smoothly. The groom’s uncle, who was a minister, was considered to be the man to fit the bill as he was the most respected and honoured of the guests, and his job apparently conferred the requisite status for the chairman. But as we sat down for the reception, there was a little huddle of the senior family members and it was pointed out that another man, the son of a Chief and a high ranking official of the United Nations, actually outranked the minister. So he had to take over – a job which he clearly didn’t want, but which he had to take to avoid any offence.

Usually, though, pride is at the root of it all. Even in church we love to have the apparent status that we think is conferred on us by having a title, chairing a committee, having responsibility. Somehow we have taken on the notion that position equals power. Usually a position means some kind of knowledge that is

not widely available and that's where the power actually lies. But Jesus makes it very obvious in this passage that those who become Christians or join a church as a means of advancing themselves are very much mistaken. In the words we've read this morning, we see what being a disciples is really all about – **Servanthood, Inclusion and Openness.**

1. **SERVANTHOOD** (v35)

Paradoxically, says Jesus, those who are really going to be accorded respect and authority are those who do not seek such things. Those who try to climb to the top of the pile, end up at the bottom. Those who want to walk the way of Jesus are to be servants, always looking out to serve others. I have to say that, by and large, that is one of the impressive things about this fellowship and it was noticeable when I first arrived. A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since then, but I think it is still true to say that there are many wonderful “servants” in this congregation. Not that we should be complacent, nor should we assume that everyone has the right attitude.

There is no place amongst the disciples of Jesus for arrogance, for “pulling rank” or for any kind of possessiveness about the tasks that we do for him. What we do we do for the good of all and for the joy of serving God. And often it is the people who show the greatest desire to be servants that get the greatest respect. I took my 11 plus exams at a school in Winchester that was at that time a boys' secondary modern school. It had an appalling reputation. The buildings were decrepit, the pupils violent and undisciplined, the teachers demoralised and the headmaster more or less a prisoner in his office for most of the time. Families who were able to would send their children to schools in other towns rather than to Romsey Road School. The a new headmaster was appointed – Mr Beecham, I think his name was. And the school began to turn around. It was renamed. The buildings were refurbished. Its reputation rose and by the time I returned to Winchester after time away at university it was oversubscribed. I had to go to the school as part of a pre-teaching arrangement and when I walked into the foyer, never having met the headmaster before, I asked the man who was polishing the floor where I might find him. It turned out the man with the polisher was Mr Beecham, getting stuck in because one of the caretaking staff was absent. His growing respect was due to his willingness to serve.

That's the kind of people we are called to be – servants. We are first of all servants of Jesus Christ, committed to doing his will and following his agenda – which will very probably include suffering and even humiliation for his sake – rather than our own safe and self-serving agenda. And serving Jesus will necessarily involve serving each other too – looking out for each other's needs, attempting to help wherever we can, subordinating our own needs and desires to the needs of others. Servanthood not status is at the very foundation of Christian behaviour and attitudes.

2. **INCLUSION** (v37)

And to illustrate that, Jesus grabs a small child. Our servanthood – our commitment to the agenda of Jesus Christ – is demonstrated by our willingness to welcome all into the life of the Kingdom, into the context of the church. In the other stories of Jesus' life told by Matthew and Luke, Jesus uses a child to drive home the idea that we should have the same attitude, the same approach to life as a child. Here, though, he is talking about our attitudes **to** a child. It is the way his followers responded to a child, the way they made a child feel welcome, that was to be the measure of their desire to be inclusive in their behaviour as his followers.

In our contemporary culture, where everything seems to be geared towards children's rights and satisfying children's wants, we find it difficult to identify with the people of Jesus' time, when a child was a person with no status, rank or possessions. Although they were obviously much loved – as we see in some of the stories of Jesus' healing miracles – children had absolutely no status within the

community. They were certainly there to be “seen and not heard” – and many people wouldn’t actually want to see them either. Jesus says to his followers that they are to welcome children, to make room for them and acknowledge not only their existence but their participation in the life of the community.

The message is that there is to be no discrimination at all – if you can welcome a child, you can welcome anyone. I would like to think that anyone would feel welcome amongst us. Clearly that is not always the case and we may well need to work a bit harder at that. Anyone who comes into this place, who joins us for worship or any other aspect of our life together is to be included, to be welcomed. And that is something that is a responsibility not just for our welcoming group but for all of us – even if a visitor happens to sit in the seat we normally sit in or doesn’t appear to satisfy the arbitrary norms that we set up. Those who want to follow Jesus are to be an inclusive community, not an exclusive club. And that is clearly demonstrated in the next little bit of this story.

3. OPENNESS (vv39-41)

“Tolerance” might have been a better word to use, but that has become overused and lost a good deal of its force (a bit like “inclusion”, really). John speaks up on this occasion (the only time he appears in Mark’s story) and tells Jesus that they’ve seen someone doing things in Jesus’ name and – horror of horrors – he is not one of them! Jesus’ reply is that there’s no problem with that. If he’s doing things in Jesus’ name and the orbit of the Kingdom is being extended, then good luck to him. He’s certainly not doing them any harm.

Well, were Jesus to turn up today at some of our meetings, we would find him dismissed as being hopelessly naïve. Surely we cannot expect those who don’t conform to our strict guidelines about what is and isn’t acceptable to be in any way involved in the work of Jesus. You cannot allow that kind of thing to go on – he may be someone who isn’t quite sound on some aspect of our treasured doctrine. But Jesus actually says let him get on with it – good on him! He’s trying to serve Jesus and is, on this occasion, actually doing so more successfully than the disciples have recently done. This is a clear rebuke to restrictive ideas about what is and isn’t acceptable mission activity, and we need to heed it as desperately today as John and the others did then.

The Kingdom of God is being extended in all kinds of ways and we need to recognise that. There is no monopoly on doing God’s will held by Baptists or United Reformed folk – or, believe it or not, by evangelicals. Over the past few years, the one thing that has saddened me most about working in the church is the refusal of so many people – from all quarters of the Body of Christ – to accept that God might choose to work in ways that are not quite what we want, or use people that we think are unacceptable. Meeting not far from us here this morning are Christians who will have nothing to do with any other churches in this city because they believe everyone apart from them is in error: who want to plant a church in Tamworth because there is, according to their website, “*no uncompromised Christian witness in that town.*” I have heard preachers attack their co-workers in the mission of Christ because of differences over doctrine. One man I heard declaring that a leader in another denomination “*hates Jesus Christ*” because of his views on the Holy Spirit. Just think of the furore over the so-called “Toronto Blessing” – the claims that it was all demonically inspired and was leading people into heresy. I think I’ve told you before about a conversation I had with another minister about Tom Wright, whom I consider to be one of the most articulate and anointed servants of God writing and preaching in England today. He was, according to this other person, “*not very sound on the atonement*”, and because he wasn’t up to scratch on that particular area of doctrine, he was dismissed as worse than useless. If the people who put so much time and effort into identifying what they consider to be the shortcomings of other Christians put just a fraction of that time and effort into evangelism, the church would be growing considerably faster than it is at present.

Now I'm not saying for one moment that we just accept everyone and everything who appears to have a veneer of spirituality. There is still the need – as was apparent in this situation Mark relates – for the name of Jesus to be squarely at the centre of all that's happening. If you look into the book of *Acts*, you'll find a couple of instances where exorcists who were trying to do things in Jesus' name were well and truly out of order because of their attitudes and motivation. Simon the Sorcerer in *Acts 8:18* was in it for the money, not for the Kingdom. The seven sons of Sceva and Elymas were clearly wanting to further their own ends rather than those of the Kingdom of God.

Some of you, who know your gospels well, might also point to what Jesus is recorded as saying by Matthew and Luke (*Matthew 12:30, Luke 11:23*) – more or less the reverse of this (and more in tune, it seems, with good old George W Bush): "*He who is not with me is against me.*" Jesus said that in the context of exorcism too, but there he was talking about those who actively criticised and opposed his own exorcisms, those who were determined to go against Jesus. Here, in Mark's story, Jesus is talking about those who make positive use of the name of Jesus to carry on the fight against the forces of evil and thus work for the Kingdom of God.

God is at work in all kinds of ways and through all kinds of people. The Kingdom is being extended in ways that we cannot always understand and through people we might not always immediately identify as Christians like us. But that is a reason to rejoice, not to condemn. Look at what Paul says to the Christians in Philippi (*Philippians 1:15-18*). When it comes down to it, the touchstone is given by Paul in *1 Corinthians 12:3*. Jesus himself says here that "*no-one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad against me*" – and I do not think he's being naïve there. Even the smallest service done in the name of Jesus is worthy of a reward – and whether or not you're sound on the atonement, have spoken in tongues or work with people from other parts of the Christian church does not come into it.

As with all the things Mark records about Jesus, we need to take this very seriously indeed. In the end, this comes down to your motivation for following Jesus Christ, for wanting to be a part of the Kingdom of God. Why do you want to follow him? Why do you want to be a part of the church? Is it to further your own ends? Are you hoping to get some kind of status or kudos or material gain out of it? That's a temporal reason. It's not going to help in the long run. And if you do want to pursue those ends as a follower of Jesus, you're naturally going to have to set up all kinds of tests of soundness and suitability in order to safeguard your own investment in the Kingdom. In the end, I would suggest, you'll be the only one who is right and, indeed, the only person in the Kingdom at all.

Or are you following Jesus to help extend the influence and power of the Kingdom of God? Are you just so desperate to see others acknowledging Jesus as Lord and enjoying the benefits of the Kingdom that you will do anything, however lowly and however difficult, to serve that end? That's an eternal reason. The rewards might be pretty pathetic in this life, but, as they say, the fringe benefits are out of this world! You'll need to swallow your pride as Jesus asks you to welcome people to whom you might never have given a second glance in other contexts – and not only welcome them, but serve them. And you'll need to swallow your pride as you come to realise that Jesus uses some people who don't necessarily do things the way you think they ought to be done. But in the end it's worth it and however insignificant may appear the service that you offer in the name of Jesus, you "*will certainly not lose your reward.*"

Questions for discussion

1. In what ways do we allow ourselves to pursue "greatness" within the church?
2. Give some examples of servant activity in the church. In what ways have you personally been served by other Christians?

3. If someone else had said what Jesus says in v39,40, would you have considered them naïve? Why/why not?
4. How far should we go in our acceptance of others who claim to be working in Jesus' name?
5. Is there one particular thing you have learned from this passage?