

THE FEAR OF UNDERSTANDING

Mark 9: v32

“But they did not understand what he said, and were afraid to ask.”

What was going on here? You would not expect this from the disciples. Here they are, they have just recognized and declared that he is the Christ – sent by God. Jesus tells them what this means – but they do not understand. And this is the perplexing part – they were even afraid to ask him what he meant.

But perhaps that is not that unusual. I am sure you have had that experience of being afraid to ask when you don't quite understand what is going on. I remember a few years ago Enid and I had been visiting the South Street Seaport in New York City. It is one of those developments of the old seaports that seem to have sprung up in old disused ports. South Street Seaport is on the South side of Manhattan and a very picturesque development with plenty of shops to take your money, and with some old sailing ships moored alongside the old dock. You were led to think of the days of the old clipper ships which did so much to make the new country a trading nation. Well, it was getting late and we wanted to get back to our hotel in mid-Manhattan and we hailed a taxi. Surprisingly we got one immediately. It seemed like luck to us at the time, but as our driver took off and started driving like a drunken man chased by demons we were not quite so sure about our luck. As you know, the only language that taxi drivers in New York can't speak is English. So when, while he was driving madly up Broadway, he started gesticulating wildly and talking to us in a language I could not identify let alone understand and we became very concerned. What on earth was up!! Again he started gesticulating and chattering away at a pace that matched the speed of the cab. I certainly could not understand, and quite frankly, this being New York I was more than afraid to ask.

After a while it turned out he was only trying to ask where exactly we wanted to be dropped off. The fear of our asking was the fear that we would hear something we did not wish to hear. In this case we began to believe that we were in the hands of a madman who only wanted to take our money. But our driver was not a bad man, only a very bad driver. He did get us to our hotel safely and finally in good humor. We laughed a good deal that night about our unfounded apprehension.

So why were the disciples, in not understanding, afraid of asking Jesus to explain to them what it meant when he said that as the Son of man he came to suffer and to die?

There are several reasons why one would not understand. First is the simple reason, the reason why we were apprehensive in our taxi. We simply did not understand what was being said and so we did not understand the driver's intention. In the same way the disciples may not have understood what Jesus meant by calling himself the “Son of Man.” Who was the “Son of Man” and why should he suffer? They would surely have understood the reference to the “Son of Man” from their knowledge of scripture. Daniel talks of a Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven to help and save the nations from the grip of the brutal beasts who had taken over the rule of the earth. The Son of Man, then, for them would be the one whom God had sent to save. What, I am sure, they did

not understand, and were very much afraid of asking about, was Jesus claim that the Son of man was to suffer. That simply was not in the cards for them. It seemed to make the Son of Man somewhat less than the glorious figure that appears in the book of Daniel.

Why should this figure of God's saving power have to suffer? That surely was too profound an idea to have to deal with. And anyway, if it meant that the process of saving was one in which suffering was involved, would that mean that this in some ways would have difficult implications for them. Now we begin to understand why they did not want to probe this any further, and why they were afraid to ask what was meant.

Another reason for not understanding could have been that they did not want to understand. To get some idea of what is going on here look at what happens next in our story. Here are the disciples pondering who is going to be the greatest in the new Kingdom. In other words they were setting up the hierarchy and a heavenly bureaucracy already. They were pretty sure that there would be a good, better and best, with the best ruling, and they were betting on the fact that they would be amongst the elite. They surely would be the second lieutenants in this new Kingdom of God.

The trouble was that the disciples were still playing a game and the reality of their situation had not really grasped them. They were going to be the good guys, and therefore they were going to be in charge. The trouble is that childish games sometimes lose touch with reality. And what the claim Jesus was making about himself as the "Son of Man" who was to suffer and to die was presenting to the disciples a touch of the reality of the new Kingdom. They did not want to understand, nor did they want to ask, because the reality of Jesus and his understanding of servanthood was threatening to their game in which they were to be the new rulers in this Kingdom.

Jesus brought a new meaning to the title "Son of Man". The focus was placed on the idea that the "Son of Man" had come to serve those who were lost, and that in Jesus this had come to fruition. One can almost sense the disciples asking themselves: "Is it God's task to seek and to serve the lost?" It must have seemed easier to think in terms of the old ways and think that God is the supreme ruler who was more concerned for his own prerogatives. Then, as his lieutenants the disciples should be more concerned with God's prerogatives than with the needs of those around them. Jesus wanted to upset the status quo and make service to others a primary task. This was a challenge that the disciples were not quite ready to accept and so were afraid to ask any more about it.

The third reason they did not want to ask any further questions about Jesus' mission might have been that they lacked confidence in themselves. I think that we can have a lot of sympathy with them in this. They were intimidated by the challenge. Look at what they were being asked to do. They were being asked to give their whole lives, their very selves, to serve others. To acknowledge that others had needs they were being asked to serve. When things are going well it is easy to think of life as only having joys and happy moments. But life is wider and deeper than the pleasant life of leisure on a Carnival Cruise boat.

F.W. Robertson has said this of the two sides of life, the joy and the suffering:

“There is a false view of things which we get when we try to shut out the thought of suffering. Think of the young man and the young woman who make gaiety their home day after day and night after night, and then think of Christ with the sick and maimed around Him; think of one who surrounds himself with the entertainment of this world, and think of one whose day is spent in passing from one sick chamber to another. Observe the infinite difference in the views which they respectively form of life...Shut out suffering, and you see only one side of this strange and fearful thing, the life of man.

As the suffering servant Jesus goes to the very depth of our understanding and our being. This is no superficial “Hallelujah” Jesus; he is at one with us in every aspect of our living. They must have asked themselves whether they were up to the task of accepting this as their way of life.

The fourth reason they might have been afraid to ask was that in Jesus they encountered God and in that encounter they were being shaken to the very depth of their beings. They were afraid, not of the future and what it would hold for them, but what was being revealed in the encounter with God in Jesus. As we have seen in their joshing over who was to be the greatest in the kingdom they revealed something of the pride that is so characteristic of us. Pride in self is at the root of human evil. It was Adam’s desire to be like God in all knowledge that led him to take the fruit of the tree. He could not bear to think that there was anyone who could know more. Pride means that we shut out the very idea of God from our minds and is the denial of God. As C.S.Lewis has pointed out: our pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. If I am a proud man, then, as long as there is one person in the whole world more powerful, or richer, or cleverer than I, he or she is my rival and my enemy. Thus I cannot countenance God for in Him one has met the boundary of human life.

This is what Jesus is trying to get over to the disciples by telling them that it is in the acceptance of the child that they accept God. It is in the acceptance of the vulnerable, the open and the trusting being of the child that one accepts God.

When we approach God we are asked to approach Him as children before a merciless world, but trusting Him nevertheless. When we encounter that power, when we encounter that which gives us the awareness of our vulnerability we become as a child before this power of God.

The disciples were afraid to ask, I think, because they already knew the answer but they did not want to encounter and deal with this reality.

How well I still remember, after so many years, walking up to the door of my college where they used to pin the results of the final examinations (no internet then!) and as I approached that fateful moment of looking at the results how fearful I was of seeing what those results would be. Are we not afraid to pick up the telephone when we are expecting news that could be good or bad. We are afraid for the worst. I think the disciples knew that the meaning of Jesus’ words about himself would reveal to them that they had to face themselves for what they really were. But why was this bad news. Surely, Jesus’ revelation of himself as the Son of God was good news. But the bad news was the good news. For in facing Jesus they learned they had to accept themselves for what they were, not all-powerful lieutenants but vulnerable human beings. They had come to know

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that they were known by God – and in our vulnerability we are like little children again. It is hard for us to adopt a child-like honesty before the self which we are.

In Sophocles' Greek tragedy *Antigone* we are shown the contrast that we have to deal with if we are to be honest in our understanding of what it means to encounter God. The Chorus in the play gives praise to the wondrous nature of mankind: "Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man; the power that crosses the white sea, driven by the stormy south wind, making a path under surges that threaten to engulf him; and Earth, the eldest of the gods, the immortal, the unwearied, doth he wear, turning the soil with the offspring of horses, as the ploughs go to and fro from year to year." Wondrous man rules the sea, the earth and all that is contained in it.

But it is Antigone, the daughter of the King, who understands the dilemma of human life. Out of filial love for her brother who had rebelled against the king and now lay dead in battle she buried him with all the rites that were proper but which had been denied him by his father the king. His order was that no traitor be given a burial. Antigone heard the voice of the heavens as they demanded that love of her brother should lead to an honorable burial. Antigone defied the human law given by her father the King because the divine law had to overrule it. The divine law was more important to her than the demands of human law. Man may rule the waves and the earth and the sky, but before the divine reality this is as nothing.

Human power on the one hand, divine justice on the other. What divine justice makes us realize is that there are duties beyond our human demands. This is the truth that the disciples knew deep down and were afraid to face.

Are we afraid to face that simple yet so profound truth? You and I are vulnerable creatures before God, but in that very vulnerability we are taken up into his arms and are made whole. In accepting our weakness we come to understand the love of God, that he comes to us in our weakness, and facing up to and accepting our own vulnerability we are able to accept others in their sufferings and in their joys.

"Then he took a child, set him in front of them, and put his arm around him: 'Whoever receives a child like this in my name,' he said, 'receives me; and, whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me.'" In understanding the vulnerability that Jesus accepted in his own humanity, one understands also that depth of God's love for us. We may not be able to understand the theology of the Kingdom, but we should not be afraid to ask of God that he accept us as we are. He both knows us and accepts us.

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