

and His Kingdom; 'Whoever receives a child like this in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me, but the One who sent me.'

Yet again, Jesus challenges us with words which take us further than we expected to go. When Jesus picked up a child, He 'received' the child and 'placed it in their midst' (9:37), giving the child the place of honour amongst the disciples that was normally His. He then took the child in His arms. This was more than a gesture, for what Mark records here is more like John's story of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples (John 13:1f.), because in this simple act, Jesus showed the disciples that an attitude of service was what God required of His disciples, even though they could not fully see it at the time.

### Application

Jesus' act of 'receiving' the child in this way has been used by some Christians over the centuries as a justification of infant baptism. This, however, stretches the analogy too far, and the question of the appropriateness of infant baptism is something that must be argued about from other Scriptures. What the passage does teach us about children is that our ministry to them is an important indicator of our faith and our attitudes towards God. For God is to be found in little children, and in receiving them and nurturing them. I have come across Christians who have argued that small children should not be allowed into certain Christian acts of worship, largely because of the distraction they pose. Personally, I find it extraordinary that anyone should think it right to dismiss children from any place of worship or act of worship, under any circumstances. There are many cultural issues we have to face about the upbringing of children, but it seems to me that in this passage our Lord made it crystal clear that we must have an attitude of acceptance of little children, whatever our circumstances. That is a test of our faith in itself, and it shows whether we are worthy of the Kingdom.

Although Jesus ends the passage holding a child, we should not forget the importance of what He said previously, when He began to explain to the disciples what true discipleship was. The first lesson of all was 'the first should be last ... and the servant of all' (9:35). There is no exception to this principle of service even to this day. Most godly people who hold high office in the church will quickly acknowledge that they do so to serve the Church and the people of God. However, it is my experience that there are those who really do aspire to greater things, and will climb any ladder of power and influence they find before them. This is always disturbing, wherever it is found. It is right to aspire to greater service, but when the attractions of power infiltrate the church there can be a terrible price to pay; yet it happens all too easily. All of us need to keep Jesus' first principle of discipleship in mind, and have an attitude of service which is shown throughout everything we do.

### Questions (for use in groups)

1. Why was it necessary for Jesus to die? Discuss this with reference to the reading.
2. In what sense can we call people in the church 'great'? Is it wise to do this whilst someone is still alive?
3. How are children made welcome in your church?

### Discipleship

If it is possible, try to find a group of people from your church who are prepared to discuss this passage of Scripture with you. This may be a church house group, or perhaps an ad hoc group of family or friends. Describe the principles of discipleship and service which you find within the passage and ask the group whether this is the kind of discipleship which is found amongst Christians today? This may be hard to do, but when there is an important issue at stake such as this, the effort may well prove worthwhile.

### Final Prayer

All glory and power are Yours, Almighty God; creator, redeemer and friend of sinners. You have touched our lives and saved us; now stretch our minds to embrace the great truths of Your eternal purposes, so that we live by the light of Your glory. All praise to You, Almighty God: AMEN

### Prayer

Reveal Yourself afresh, great Lord of All. Give Your people visions of the Kingdom which will excite and encourage them, both in their faith and the doing of Your will. Bring Your people to life again with the zeal and energy to do Your will and proclaim Your Word; and wipe away the dross of indifference which still sits heavily on the church today. Liberate us into action! AMEN

### Other Prayer Suggestions

#### Weekly Theme: Elections

Pray for honesty and integrity to raise their heads within elections. All too quickly, elections in any country can be marred by false accusations arising from intentional or unintentional misunderstanding and blown out of all proportion. This makes voters become very cynical about politics at a time when they need to be engaged with it. Pray for wisdom amongst voters.

### Meditation

This is the call of the Gospel; hear the Lord's call.

In faith, go further than the wisdom you have known so far;  
And in the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
Seek to understand this complex world He came to save.

Reach out with kindness to those whose lives are different,  
And in the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
Touch with love and grace the lives of those around you.

Set all else of yours aside, all wealth and power and status;  
And in the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
You'll have much more to give with which to serve the world.

Lose yourself within the Gospel; be content with Christ, not self,  
And in the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
Bury yourself; and let others find their Saviour through what you do.

Give yourself that others might live, and follow your Master.

### Bible Study - Mark 9:30-37

<sup>30</sup> They carried on from there and passed through Galilee. However, Jesus did not want anyone to know it <sup>31</sup> because He was teaching His disciples; 'The Son of Man will be handed over to men and they will kill Him, and three days after His death He will rise.' <sup>32</sup> But they did not understand what He meant and were afraid to ask Him.

<sup>33</sup> Then they came to Capernaum, and when He was in the house, He asked them, 'what were you talking about while we travelled?' <sup>34</sup> Yet they kept silent, for whilst on the road, they had been discussing amongst themselves who was the greatest.

<sup>35</sup> So He sat down and called together the twelve. He said to them, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must be the last of all and the servant of all.'

<sup>36</sup> Then He took a young boy and placed him in their midst; and taking him in His arms, He said to them, <sup>37</sup> 'Whoever receives a child like this in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me, but the One who sent me.'

### Review

After the awesome events of the Transfiguration (9:1-13) and the healing of a boy with an evil spirit (9:14-29), Jesus needed to move on and teach the disciples the truth about what was happening to them. Everything had changed, and Jesus was now set on going to Jerusalem where he would 'be killed and after three days rise again.' (8:31), but the disciples did not understand. They had just heard their leader, Peter, tell Jesus what was on all their lips, 'You are the Messiah!' (8:29); and Peter, James and John now told them that Jesus had met with God (9:2f.) together with Elijah and Moses! Even though Jesus had told them not to talk about

it openly, the disciples must have been excited, because their Jewish upbringing and teaching told them that God's rule would shortly come, and great and wonderful things would happen now the Messiah had come! Jesus, was indeed the Messiah, and they would therefore have the great privilege of being a part of God's action!

In this reading, we are told that Jesus was on the move again. He had been in Caesarea Philippi (north) but had turned back southwards, to pass through Galilee towards Jerusalem. We know this from Mark's next comment about Jesus' location in 10:32, but most of our passage today describes what took place either on the road, or at Capernaum (9:33) where Jesus apparently stayed secretly at a house He knew. He did not want His whereabouts to be known generally because He wanted to begin teaching the disciples alone, and the reason for going to Jerusalem was to fulfil His Father's will (9:31), and He was not going to let anything to get in the way of this.

Jesus talked to the disciples as they travelled about the path of suffering and death which lay before Him (9:31); but the disciples could not engage with this because their minds were elsewhere. The next verse (9:32) demonstrates the gap between Jesus and the disciples which was growing wider all the time. The disciples did not understand what Jesus said but were afraid to ask Him about what it meant, for fear of being verbally 'put down', as they had experienced before (e.g.8:17), and their own understanding of Jesus grew dimmer and dimmer. By the end of the Gospel, when the time came for Jesus to be hauled away to be arraigned before the authorities on charges bearing the death penalty, they were completely lost, and ran away (14:43-72). The disciples' pride at being close to the Messiah prevented them from learning the truth from Jesus; this is a truth about the Gospel from which we need to learn.

Similarly, pride was the motive for the disciples' conversations behind Jesus' back (9:33,34); they may have heard Jesus talk to them about suffering, but from their point of view, the coming glory of God meant that they were in prime position to gain status in the new Kingdom! Had not the twelve sons of Jacob become clan leaders of Israel? Were not the disciples themselves the chosen twelve leaders of the new Kingdom? Also, if Judah was the foremost of the twelve tribes, then who was the most important of the disciples? It is not too difficult to see how these questions arose in their minds and how they escalated and tempted the disciples to think in an ungodly manner.

Jesus knew what the disciples were discussing and cut through the hypocrisy with a typically breathtaking gesture, which has come to mean so much more. He took hold of a young child and said plainly that God was not interested in status, but in those who were prepared to be the servants of the least in the Kingdom. It was not those with status and authority who would be close to the Father; instead, those who sought to 'receive a child ... in my name' (9:37) would be close to the Father's heart.

At the time, the disciples may well have been confused by this. Now, we have no excuse to fail to understand the plain meaning of all this gesture. Through this story from Mark's Gospel and from countless other examples of selfless living within the life of God's church over many years, the Holy Spirit teaches us today that the path of discipleship is one of service and never of privilege.

### Going Deeper

We are now coming to the part of Mark's Gospel where Jesus begins to teach the disciples about what it means to follow Him. Although they did not understand it at the time, this teaching has become very important for us who follow them. In this passage, Jesus used the example of a child as a teaching aid. We will have to be careful, however, because Jesus 'took a child' more than once, and on each occasion, He taught the disciples different things!

#### **The second prediction of Jesus' death**

Our passage today contains the second prediction of Jesus' death (9:31), the first being immediately after Peter's declaration (8:31), and the third being in the next chapter (10:32-34). If you look at these three passages you will find that Mark clearly gives place names which identify Jesus' journey. The first prediction takes place in the northern region of Caesarea Philippi, the second at Capernaum, and the third on the way up to Jerusalem. Soon after the third prediction, Jesus entered Jerusalem (11:1) on the famous day we now celebrate as 'Palm Sunday'. In these and other ways, Mark built up the tension of his story as Jesus continued to teach the disciples like pilgrims, travelling to the Holy city.

What Jesus said about His future was this; 'The Son of Man will be handed over to men and they will kill Him, and three days after His death He will rise.' It is the shortest of the 'predictions', but it contains one (Greek) word which does not appear in the other three, which is translated 'handed over'. It is a simple enough expression, but one which captures much of the pathos and agony of what happened to Jesus in His last days. Until Jesus was betrayed He

was a free man, even if He was hounded by crowds and Pharisees. After His betrayal, Jesus was no longer free, but held in the hands of other people who would decide His future. Perhaps only those who have been held captive or imprisoned (for whatever reason) can fully appreciate what it means to be 'handed over' into the power of others, and lose their liberty.

The inclusion of this word is important for Mark's Gospel because it is frequently used in the story of Jesus' ordeal at the hands of the authorities. It also gives us an understanding of what was on Jesus' mind as He talked to the disciples (in our passage) about status and power in the Kingdom. Jesus knew what would happen to Him in Jerusalem because of the earthly status and power of the religious authorities who would kill Him, and it was the very opposite of the justice and truth of the Kingdom of God. What Jesus endured means that now, the true destiny of a disciple of Jesus is not to be 'handed over' to the power of death, but to be 'handed over' to the loving mercy of our Saviour, through whom we may find eternal life in the Kingdom! It is no wonder that Jesus sought to turn our ideas of status and authority upside down!

#### **Talking on the road**

The gap between the disciples and Jesus is clear from the way they kept silent when challenged by Jesus (9:34). They had been talking behind His back about their own agenda for what might soon happen (see above), and were afraid of Jesus. It may seem to be a presumption to say that the disciples talked behind Jesus' back, but at this point it is worth thinking about how Jesus and the disciples travelled, for this will help explain more about this passage. In those days, most of the common pathways used by people were not wide thoroughfares; mostly they were barely wide enough for people to walk side by side. Roman roads were more substantial, but Israel and Galilee were not covered by these as were many other parts of the Roman Empire. On a single path track, however, the normal courtesy afforded to a rabbi by his disciples would be that the rabbi walked first with his followers walking behind in strict order of status, with a long serving and favoured follower immediately behind the rabbi, and so on (we know this from written documents of the era). From our perspective it may seem odd that the disciples were discussing 'places' in the Kingdom, but this explains why it could well have come from the natural subject of who walked where in the 'pecking order' behind Jesus on the pathway!

Jesus, as ever, knew what the disciples were thinking and responded with clarity. He sat down; taking the traditional seated position of one speaking with authority, and said; 'If anyone wants to be first, he must be the last of all and the servant of all.' This saying is one of the most memorable of descriptions of the Kingdom of God. It reads rather like the well attested Jewish saying used by rabbis of Jesus' day, 'God will exalt him who humbles himself, God will humble him who exalts himself', but Jesus changed the emphasis. The Jewish saying emphasises God's judgement of human action, but Jesus changed it into a moral principle which begs significant questions about how people behave in this life, and its consequence for the next.

We who read Scriptures today will find this saying of Jesus in a number of different places in the Gospels of Mark (here and 10:43,44), Matthew (23:11) and Luke (9:48 and 22:26,27). If you read all these passages you will find that Jesus used this phrase in different circumstances and for different reasons. On at least one occasion, He said this as a clear warning to the disciples that those who thought highly of themselves would find themselves at the bottom of the pile in the Kingdom of God, and on other occasions, He said it as if it was a principle of the Kingdom to which the disciples should aspire. There is a little bit of both the threat and the promise here in verse 35, as it is both as a warning to shun the attractions of 'status', and also an invitation to aspire to servant-hood as a way of living.

#### **The child in the midst**

In order to illustrate what He said, Jesus took a child (the Greek indicates a young male child) and held him in the crook of His arm and wrapped in His cloak (again, indicated by the Greek but difficult to translate). The scene set by Mark is remarkable, and we instinctively see that Jesus did this to illustrate His principle that the least is the greatest in the Kingdom of God. However, that is not what Jesus proceeded to say. It is what lies behind words we are familiar with from Matthew's Gospel; 'unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.' (Matt 18:3), however, what Mark reports here does not ask us to take our example from children in this way. Jesus' words in our passage talk about our attitude towards children rather than the example they give us, and He says that a right attitude towards children will indicate whether we are really worthy to 'receive' Christ., and therefore find God