

[Mark 9:30-37](#)

“How many times must I tell you?”

If you are a parent, how many times have you said that to your children?

And how many of us remember being on the receiving end of those words when we were kids?

Today’s reading is a ‘How many times?’ moment between Jesus and his disciples. It contains teaching that he gives them on more than one occasion, not just here.

And if we’re kind to the disciples, I can understand why they needed to hear this several times from Jesus. Because what he teaches them here is so contrary to what they would have picked up from the incumbent religious leaders of their day.

Yes, we are talking about teaching that needs to be repeated because it’s revolutionary and requires transformation in thinking and behaviour.

And perhaps surprisingly, even after two thousand years of Christianity, some of the things Jesus calls his disciples to rethink here are ones we keep having to rethink if we are to follow him more closely.

Firstly, says Jesus, his disciples need to **rethink *suffering*** – and specifically, his suffering as the Messiah.

He said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.’ (verse 31)

We know what a revolution it was for the first disciples to consider that Israel’s Messiah would be a suffering figure, not an all-conquering, triumphant warlord in the conventional sense.

And we stand on centuries of Christian tradition about all that Jesus accomplished through his death on the Cross – the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God and one another, the defeat of death and the powers of evil, all out of his love for us. We mark that with crosses in our churches and we celebrate it at Holy Communion.

But despite that, we too lapse from the centrality of Jesus’ suffering at times. We want to settle our arguments via the ‘might is right’ route. We like to see

our political opponents well and truly 'done over' at the ballot box. We talk of that neighbour we're never going to forgive. In one form or another we default to that 'might is right' approach, ignoring the way of Jesus.

The hymn writer named in Methodist hymn books as Frances Jane van Alstyne and known in most other books as Fanny Crosby wrote a hymn called 'Jesus, keep me near the Cross'. The first verse reads,

Jesus, keep me near the cross,
There a precious fountain;
Free to all, a healing stream,
Flows from Calv'ry's mountain.

But I venture to suggest that being kept near the Cross isn't just about remembering the mercy and forgiveness we receive, it's also about modelling the life we live. Remember what I said last week about being willing to suffer for our faith.

Secondly, says Jesus, his disciples need to **rethink serving**.

Now we get to the argument the Twelve were having, and which they're embarrassed about when Jesus asks them about it, because they were arguing about who was the greatest (verses 33-34).

³⁵ Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, 'Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.'

'Sitting down' – that's the posture of an authoritative teacher, the same way there is a special chair, the *kathedra*, for a bishop – a cathedral is where a bishop has his or her place of authoritative teaching. It's like universities saying that a professor 'holds a chair'. What Jesus is saying here is important.¹

And it's a direct repudiation of our fame and celebrity culture, as well as the way we are deferential to people just because they hold a certain office.

Now you might think that sort of thing doesn't exist in the church, but not only was it very real among the disciples of Jesus it's also alive and kicking in the Christian church today. And it's a poison.

A controversial American pastor called Mark Driscoll came over to London a few years ago and preached at an event held at the Royal Albert Hall.

After the event, a few people were waiting outside to get Driscoll's autograph and a photo with him.

Afterwards, as they drove away in a taxi, the colleague [who was accompanying him] expressed amazement that a pastor would get this kind of response. In reply, Driscoll says:

‘I don’t know if you have noticed or not, but I am kind of a Big Deal.’²

Now you may say that’s an extreme example and to some extent it is, but given how we have our Christian celebrities, and given how we think certain people of a particular rank are more important in the Church than others, I suggest to you we have a problem here and we’re not taking Jesus seriously.

Mark Driscoll never learned his lesson and his large church in Seattle imploded. We need to learn the lesson for the sake of our own spiritual health and the health of the church. Our concern needs to be with whether we are serving people rather than whether people are admiring us and looking up to us.

And that takes us to the **third** and final lesson Jesus has for his apostles here:

³⁶ He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ ‘Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.’

What is this about? Some people have a very sentimental answer about it being to do with either the simplicity or the innocence of children. But I have to wonder how much time such people have spent with children to think that!

No: Jesus here is calling his followers to **rethink status**. In first-century Palestine children had no social status whatsoever. They were under the care and authority of others with no rights of their own.³ How do we receive that in a culture where we’re forever banging on about our rights?

This brings everything Jesus has said so far to a climax: if you’re going to model your life on the suffering of Jesus and if you’re going to be more concerned about how you serve people, then the whole human addiction to status starts to fall away.

Should we be worried about the lack of status the church and her ministers have in our society? Sure, we know that some of that is an indication of just how widely the Christian message is rejected today, and that should concern us. So is the assumption that ministers are either here to fleece the flock of

their money or to abuse children – we’ve given society ammunition to shoot at us.

But the lack of status should not worry us at all. It means we can be released from the trappings of power to get on with serving people with the love of God in Jesus.

The thing is, everything we’ve talked about today is counter-cultural. But we’ve heard the opposite for so long and in so many ways it’s become part of us and it takes a lot of teaching from Jesus for the upside-down nature of his kingdom to sink into our minds and begin to transform us.

For Jesus does indeed call us to swim against the tide of our society. To live on the basis that God uses suffering for good, and to live as a servant rather than a celebrity, quietly getting on with the ways of Jesus with no worry for our status contradicts the ambitions of so many.

I’m not surprised it took a long time for some of this teaching to sink into those first disciples, and I’m not surprised if the same is true with us. But I hope what I’ve shared today contributes to that radical change of life to which Jesus calls each one of us.

God bless you all as you seek to serve him each day.

¹ <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/jesus-radical-inversion-of-community-values-in-mark-9/>

² <https://gracetruth.blog/2021/09/14/i-am-kind-of-a-big-deal-insecure-pride-and-humble-confidence/>

³ <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/jesus-radical-inversion-of-community-values-in-mark-9/>