

Sometimes no matter how clear we are people just don't get what we are trying to say!

Do you ever have that experience?

Some weeks I feel like I have it a lot, and I start to wonder if I actually speak the same language as the person I am talking to. Sometimes it is that I am not being clear, and other times it may be that the other person is distracted or not just listening. And sometimes we simply forget what we have been told.

I remember in my early twenties completing the Myers-Briggs personality test which told me that my language preference and ideas were such that only about 5% of people would ever get what I was saying unless I modified my language and style to fit what they could hear. This was quite a confronting piece of information for a young teacher. Now while I am not totally sold on these personality tests or management style preference tests which seem to have been the rage of different managers over the past 20-30 years, I do think they do help in some ways. While I don't know whether the Myers-Briggs test was right, it did make me from an early age be conscious that when I wanted to say something important, I try to say it in a way that others can hear, rather than in a way that might be most comfortable or clear to me. But what I have learnt in nearly 25 years of being aware of this, is that sometimes, no matter how clear you are, there are those who for whatever reason will choose to not understand what you are saying or how you are saying it.

Today in Mark's gospel we continue a series of readings where Jesus is walking with the disciples to Jerusalem. Jesus is walking to his death; and for the most part Jesus thinks he is being clear about this. For us who read the Gospels in the light of history, we can see the indicators, and may at times even wonder how it was not blindingly obvious to those walking with him. Along the road Jesus interacts with a series of different people – those like the rich young man from last week, or the woman seeking healing, or the questioning disciples. And with each interaction, Jesus uses it as a teachable moment when he tries to express to the disciples clearly that they are going to Jerusalem and he will die, but that after his death he would rise again.

It may be hard for us to understand why the disciples didn't get this, it seems like he is being clear. But for them Jesus is the promised Messiah, the one who is going to make everything different. Yes there will be persecutions, yes there might be opposition – but surely Jesus was coming to bring about the Kingdom of God (note that they heard that bit) - but they were sure this Kingdom would be on earth and that when they reached Jerusalem Jesus would take control. I suspect on some level the disciples may have understood that Jesus was talking about a different kind of rule, and even of his death – but who would want to believe that your friend and messiah is about to be murdered?

It is important that we understand this to fully appreciate the interaction between the disciples and Jesus today as James and John come to ask if they can sit on either side in glory. It is unlikely that they are talking about heaven which is so often assumed in this passage – rather that when Jesus takes control they might be at his side. They are asking both for honour, but in fairness I think they want to ensure that they are in the middle of the changes that they hope will take place.

While in Mark's version of this story, all of which are short (which has the men, rather than their mother asking), we don't hear all of Jesus' exasperation, but we do get a hint – Do you really understand what that means? Do you really understand that this will mean your death? This is a really heavy passage. Not only for James and John, but for all of the disciples, because what is clear in this interaction is that as the conversation goes on, the disciples become clearer of what Jesus is leading them to. Change will come, but not in the shape they initially had hoped – they are not going to Jerusalem to take back control (as many had hoped – especially the Zealots) rather the model of leadership which Jesus will offer will be so counter-cultural, so confronting and so non-violent they will kill him rather than embrace change.

There is something else unique in Mark's version too – Jesus introduces the word or concept of Baptism. Up until now it is John who has called people to a baptism of repentance, which Jesus partook, but until this point Jesus has not spoken of, or even embraced baptism (though he has of course embraced John's ministry). The use of the baptism imagery would have also been confronting to the disciples, and new.

Sarah Wilson¹, a theologian based in Japan suggests that in this context Baptism is a passion that one must undergo, not an action that one chooses to undertake. The distinguishing feature of baptism in Mark (and in Christianity) is precisely that it is not performed upon oneself, although one may approach it willingly, as Jesus does. James and John misunderstand the glory that they are pursuing actively, for Jesus' "baptism" is not a matter of action but of passion. Their boastful assurance "we are able!" earns a response from Jesus whose irony can only be grasped by those who read to the end of the story: you bet you're going to undergo this baptism, but it doesn't mean what you think it means. At one level James and John don't fully appreciate what they are getting themselves in for!

For Jesus in this context he wants the disciples to understand that leadership or even ministry and honour do not come from asking for it, rather it comes from the passion of living it out and living it out no matter what the consequences might be. This living with passion, living from the source of our being, living inspired by God and the baptism that God calls us to, may have outcomes that we were not prepared for.

Over the last three weeks we have heard Mark say the first will be last, and the last first and now today, that Jesus came to serve not to be served, and if we wish to be

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3799

first we must be a slave to all. These are really difficult concepts, especially for us who live in the first world in a society where slavery might still exist but is against the law.

What is Mark trying to get us to understand, and which is reiterated in the other readings for today in the image of suffering servant from Isaiah or the call to serve using what we already know in Hebrews.

On the one hand, I think we too have a predisposition to be like James and John – so often we are intent on where we think the church is going, or how our life is going to work out, that we actually stop listening to what is happening. This can often happen in our faith – we say we have heard this all before, so we stop listening to what God might be trying to teach us which is new or fresh or a reminder of something which we have forgotten.

James and John were so sure they knew where Jesus was leading them, they didn't notice it would lead them to death – though I think they are clearer after today's interaction.

Which leads to the encouragement the writer to the Hebrews is trying to build on. So often when passion leads us down a path which is not what we expected, even if it is call or a path which is one we should take sometimes don't work out. In faith, so often this discouragement leads us to walk away or give up, or even loose faith. I am not sure that we are good at talking about this in the Christianity community, but there are times when we get discouraged, and we find faith more difficult than others – the journey we are called to take has more sacrifices than we had expected; but Jesus, Mark and even the writer to the Hebrews are all consistent – of course you will have these times – but don't give up – hold fast to what you believe – even if at times that feels impossible.

It gives us another job too – as encouragers, to walk alongside one another – because sometimes the service God calls us too means we need to know we are not alone.

Today – and over the weeks and years ahead we will be told things about our faith, about our community and about each other. Jesus reminds us to listen – to listen for what is being said and not to presume we understand. It means we have to have courage to ask questions, so that we can truly understand.

If we want to be great, we are called to serve, to be companions, and to make time to listen carefully to one another, and to support one another along the way.

That was the courage Jesus was looking for in the disciples, and that is the courage Jesus asks of us in our care and discipleship with each other. Amen.