

Let These Words Sink into Your Ears

Today's passage takes us back about ten chapters in Luke's Gospel from where we've been for the past few weeks. Jesus has fed the five thousand, been transfigured on the mountain, easily exorcised a demon that the disciples couldn't even begin to banish. To all appearances, Jesus is at the top of his game. Yet, even as everyone around him is amazed at all that he's doing, Jesus turns to his disciples and says, "Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands." Talk about a buzz kill.

This is the second time that Jesus predicts his Passion in Luke's Gospel. He has to know that his prediction will be hard for his disciples to hear. As Luke tells us, they don't get it, even though their rabbi, whom Peter has recently recognized as the Messiah himself, demands their attention by saying, "Let these words sink into your ears." No need to translate the Greek here – in modern parlance, Jesus is ordering the disciples to *listen up*. They just can't.

It's not that the disciples aren't trying. It's that they don't understand what Jesus is saying. Maybe Our LORD's language is too mystical for a group of unsophisticated peasants and fishermen. Or maybe the idea of Jesus or anyone else

being “betrayed into human hands” is too far beyond their experience to imagine. Jesus’s tone must have been pretty intense, though. Otherwise, the disciples might have dared to ask him what he meant.

So instead of raising what might seem like a stupid question – something Peter was usually brave or impetuous enough to do – the disciples fall back on their tired old argument about who among them is the greatest. Bible scholars tend to take this debate at face value, so a lot of commentary on this passage stresses humility and servanthood as greatness. Jesus often speaks on that theme, but I’m not sure he’s doing that here. The disciples’ boastful argument is on full public display, but Luke tells us that Jesus brought the child into the conversation because he was aware of their “inner thoughts.” That suggests to me that Jesus is responding to something the disciples were afraid to say out loud.

Jesus could have handled the disciples’ concerns with a clarifying comment or, if he wanted them to think a bit harder, with a parable. Instead, he picks up a child – funny, how there always seems to be a little kid around when Jesus needs a hand prop – and starts talking about welcome. Welcoming the child is welcoming Jesus, and welcoming Jesus is welcoming the Father. Only after making that point

does Jesus observe that the least among the disciples is the greatest. It doesn't seem to me as if Jesus is saying that, to be great, the disciples have to be like children, though he tells them that elsewhere. Here, he's saying that, to be great, the disciples need to be humble and generous enough to welcome a child in his name.

This may sound like a distinction without a difference, but stay with me. Historians aren't in complete agreement, but the consensus appears to be that, in Jesus's time, children were valued mostly as heirs who could carry on the family line. In a culture where the pinnacle of humanity was the full-grown, autonomous man, children were seen as unfinished, in need of strict discipline to prepare them for life in what, admittedly, was a pretty harsh world. It's easy to imagine that the disciples, ambitious young men who were still vying for their own place in the world, would have little or no interest in children.

Jesus uses the word δέχομαι (déchomai) when instructing the disciples. Our Bible translates δέχομαι as "welcome," but it literally means "to take by the hand," to "take up" or "receive into hospitality," even to "embrace." δέχομαι is more than a casual "hey, kid, how's it going?" It's about opening arms and hearts, caring for

children as if they were your own, protecting and cherishing them, to honor Jesus and the Father he loves. That's what makes a disciple great.

So, what is it about the disciples' "inner thoughts" that inspires Jesus to reach for a child? Maybe the disciples really are focused on greatness and personal glory, but I wonder. Jesus tells them for the second time that he's going to be betrayed. That has to be scary. The disciples know Jesus as a miracle worker so powerful that he could pull a feast out of thin air, enjoy a friendly chat with Moses and Isaiah, and casually exorcise a demon that they couldn't begin to manage. If Jesus could be betrayed and there's nothing they can do to stop it, what hope can they have for themselves or their community, much less the Master himself? When even the Messiah can be threatened, the world becomes a truly terrifying place. It's easier to fall back on old habits of thought, arguing about things that don't matter at all – like who's the greatest – because the things that do matter feel too big and menacing for them to handle.

Jesus may very well be telling the disciples to get their egos in check. But I wonder if he isn't also giving them a mission, something they can accomplish even though they can't save him. Children are small, fragile creatures, of little account

in a world that prizes strength and dominance. They're also the future, then and now. Perhaps Jesus is urging the disciples to protect children, welcoming them in his name and the name of his Father, as a way of ensuring that humanity will endure so that his Passion can save us all, from generation to generation.

Today, those of us who want to be Jesus's disciples have a similar responsibility. Our world is threatened by climate change, pollution, overconsumption, ocean acidification, and biodiversity loss. If things continue as they are now, what kind of world will we leave our children and grandchildren? How long will Creation be able to sustain life? And what quality of life can our children and grandchildren expect to have if we don't look out for them now?

These are scary questions. They're almost as scary as Jesus's predictions of betrayal must seem to his bewildered disciples. With environmental issues looming so large, how can any one of us, even a few of us, hope to resolve them? But we have to remember that, as Christians, we have a secret weapon. Just as he was with the disciples, Jesus is with us. He hears our prayers, he knows our fears, and he gives us strength and courage to tackle tough problems in his name.

We know that the disciples accepted the mission that Jesus gave them. It took them a while but, ultimately, they marched across the known world, courageous and self-sacrificing, to bring the good news of the Gospel to a hurting humanity. They made the world a safer, more hopeful place for their children and grandchildren. And if they could do it, so can we.

A few months ago, I had the privilege of speaking briefly with the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. Archbishop Williams suggested that the divisions in our society may be a direct result of the environmental crisis. No one group, nation, or even continent can correct climate change and environmental degradation alone. It will literally take the entire world, working together, to heal and protect our shared home. History tells us that humanity isn't good at that kind of cooperation. When faced with such massive challenges, we tend to retreat into tribalism and manufacture smaller arguments that we think we can handle. We fight with our neighbors over politics, social justice or even religion, and we kick the bigger issues down the road for the next generation to handle.

But we can't do that this time because, when it comes to the environment, we're not acting just for ourselves. We're acting for our children, our

grandchildren, and the generations beyond them. Jesus has charged us with welcoming children, with caring for them and protecting them in his and the Father's names, so that's what we need to do, however difficult it may be. Like the disciples, we're on a mission from God. Let these words sink into your ears. *Amen.*