

IF ANYONE WANTS TO BE FIRST, HE MUST MAKE HIMSELF LAST OF ALL
25th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – 19 SEPTEMBER 2021



Christ with Children by Carl Bloch | public domain

'IF ANYONE WANTS TO BE FIRST, HE MUST MAKE HIMSELF LAST OF ALL...'

This gospel is disappointing; none of the disciples understand what Jesus means? We are fortunate that we know the conclusion of the gospel, the ultimate triumph of Jesus through his resurrection, otherwise why would anyone continue to read the gospel according to Mark? The story to date is unsatisfactory.

Human nature being what it is, we read about our contradictory nature in this passage of the gospel.

GOSPEL OF MARK 9:30-37

*Jesus and his disciples left from there and began a journey through Galilee, but he did not wish anyone to know about it. He was teaching his disciples and telling them, **"The Son of Man is to be handed over to men and they will kill him, and three days after his death the Son of Man will rise."** But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to question him.*

*They came to Capernaum and, once inside the house, he began to ask them, **"What were you arguing about on the way?"** But they remained silent. They had been discussing among themselves on the way who was the greatest. Then he sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, **"If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all."** Taking a child, he placed it in their midst, and putting his arms around it, he said to them, **"Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me."***

Jesus tells the disciples that he will be delivered into the hands of men who oppose him, that he will be killed by them but that he will rise again after being dead for three days. He has already had a fierce exchange with Peter on the issue and told him to back off! Again, he tells them about what is going to happen to him.

They do not understand and why should they? They are taken up with their understanding of Jesus as being the Messiah who will restore Israel to its former glory as in the days of King David and Solomon. They do understand what it means but they follow and they are thrilled. These humble men from Galilee have visions of grandeur.

They don't understand his words about betrayal, death and resurrection. Peter and Jesus had just had a tense altercation at Caesarea Philippi about his future and Jesus puts Peter in his place. People tend to leave out hard words or unpleasant realities and focus on the bright, right and pleasant future in store for them. Hence the disciples were afraid to tell Jesus they did not understand what he was talking about, no one wants to appear ignorant.

But the disciples are on a roll and thinking about the power they will have. When they return to Capernaum Jesus asks them what they had been talking about? He knew the answer before he asked the question. They said nothing because they were discussing who would have the greatest power when Jesus was king. They had said nothing when he told them what lay in store for him- death and resurrection.

As we often do, we do not ask for clarification concerning issues that we do not understand because we do not want the answer or appear stupid. We have human nature in common with the disciples.

Finally, he challenges them. They want to be powerful. Jesus tells them if they want to be first, they had to act as though they were a servant of all. The paradox of power.

They were, for example, to welcome a child who had no prestige or power. But by acting in that manner, they welcomed Jesus himself.

And not only Jesus but the Father, the one that Jesus prayed to through the night, the one whose will Jesus was attuned to. The disciples continued to learn but their understanding was slow.

Would we have been any different?

Father Gary Walker SSC

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Readings: <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/091921.cfm>