



# *Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost*

## *Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe*



Sunday 19 September 2021

### READINGS

Proverbs 31: 10-31; Psalm 1; James 3: 13 - 4: 3, 7-8a; Mark 9: 30-37

## *Power and Privilege*

Picture someone famous and his or her inner circle – the entourage who get to stay inside when the doors are closed and the crowds are shut out. Maybe you are picturing a politician, maybe an actor, a celebrity speaker, the CEO of a powerful business. You might even be that influential public figure, or you might be one of the inner circle who travels with them and gets to see behind the scenes. Whose entourage would you like to infiltrate for at least a few days?

There is an interesting mix of power and privilege that comes with being in the inner circle. You know how much sugar they like in their tea, and you also hear the honest conversations that take place behind closed doors. Some people in the entourage start to act like they are celebrities when they go home; as if they have status. They might name drop or boast to make their family jealous: power and privilege. In today's gospel passage, we go behind the scenes and become one of Jesus' entourage – his inner circle of disciples. Let's use our imagination. We are away from the crowds, traveling home to Capernaum. What Jesus teaches now is not for everyone's ears – it's between him and his closest followers.

It's a moment of privilege and vulnerability: Jesus predicts his death. For the second time, as we read in last week's gospel passage as well, Jesus tells the group that the Son of Man will be betrayed, he will be killed, and after three days, he will rise. I wonder what his tone was when he said this. There is no emotion recorded on Jesus' side. Was he very thoughtful? Was he intense and dramatic? He seems to be very distant from them. They don't understand and they are afraid to ask him about it. Last week Father Matthew explained why the disciples would have been shocked and confused. The Messiah was expected to be a conqueror, to overthrow the Roman Empire and free God's people. Being killed was not part of the picture. It must be very uncomfortable when your leader says he will be betrayed. His response will not be violent. He will be a victim, but through this event, he will demonstrate love that overcomes evil and life that has power over death.

Jesus is giving his disciples their own private glimpse into the mystery of God's kingdom, but the whole conversation is just too strange and awkward for them and the response is .. no response. It isolates him from them. When they arrive home, Jesus asks them what they were arguing about on the way back. I wonder if he'd overheard them and already knew exactly what their answer would be, or if it took him by surprise. They were arguing about who among them was the greatest.

I've always seen this as a separate incident and an opportunity for Jesus to teach about 'the great reversal': the one who wants to be greatest must be the servant of all. If we welcome a child – who in those days had absolutely no voice and no status – we are welcoming Jesus the Christ, and in doing that we are welcoming God in our midst. Jesus is identifying himself with God and with the weakest, the most vulnerable, the marginalised and the "nobodies."

If the disciples didn't understand the first message – a confusing statement about dying and rising again – in this case the message is easier to understand: “If anyone wants to be first, they must be last.” Of course, it mirrors Jesus' earlier message that the disciples did not understand – their leader would die. God (the first) would become the last: the Sovereign of All would submit to suffering and death, pouring out his life in the ultimate act of love and service. Privately, behind closed doors, Jesus took the opportunity to confide in his inner circle, and when they did not understand him, he sat down, gathered them around him and taught them one of the key lessons of the Christian faith – something that has been captured in the phrase “servant leadership.”

We'll return to what that means for us today, but before we do, I want to rewind to the part where Jesus asks his entourage, “What were you arguing about on the way?” He forces them to look at themselves and their values by bluntly asking them to put it into words. The disciples were about to see and hear themselves from Jesus' point of view and it was not a pretty sight. Again, they wanted to keep silent, feeling self-conscious and even ashamed. They were arguing over who was the greatest. Can I suggest a link here, that is more shameful than I initially realised? I have mentioned the privilege and power that come with being in the inner circle. Jesus had just revealed for the second time that he would be killed. He was going to die. And the very next conversation they fall into is an argument over who is the greatest? The Bible does not provide the details, so this is just speculation, but could it be possible that they were in the midst of a hypothetical succession battle? Who is the greatest? Which one of us could be the leader if he dies? Who is going to take over?

Maybe this is more than just a small embarrassing argument about who gets to eat first or who gets the softest sleeping mat. Could the inner circle possibly have been so self-involved that they responded to Jesus' vulnerable confession with greed and a hunger for power?

I think it is possible because it's the story of politics and business and power and corruption all around the world and in South Africa. If you can get close enough to power, you too can get rich. The news and the commissions of enquiry and the disillusion we feel when we hear yet another name and yet another deal tell this story. When you are in the inner circle, you take advantage of your privilege and you look for power. We can point fingers at politicians and name some names, but that's just because of the high profile and media attention. People are people wherever they are: if it happens there, then we should look in our own offices and boardrooms and churches and living rooms. We can look at our own circles of influence – in church groups and sports clubs and friendships. Some of us can look at our Instagram, Twitter or Facebook to evaluate what influence means to us. Who you know matters. Power and privilege are tempting. Are our ambitions selfish? What influence do we have? Are we using it for our own status or are we serving our community?

When Jesus began to talk about leading, he spoke about serving and then about welcoming a child in his name. The disciples knew that hospitality was one of the highest values of their society. So from Jesus, we learn this: good leaders have hospitable hearts. They offer a safe place to shelter for people who are on a journey. They generously equip those whom they lead. There is no true humility in trying to be small – that is not what Jesus meant by “The first will be last”. In God's Kingdom, power is not measured by privilege. Rulers don't have thrones. Wherever we are, if we are called to lead, we should do so. And when we do it well, we will understand that leaders serve others, bringing life to the world beyond ourselves and our own organisation. When power is not the goal, but leadership is, we are answering the prayer, “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”. We are welcoming Christ among us.