

**Scripture Readings:** *Job 38: 1-7, 34-41 & Mark 10: 35 - 45.*

**Reflection:** *"What do I know?"*

When I was a school chaplain to a local primary school in my first parish as a Minister, I remember talking with one of the young pupils who I knew very well - we were just passing the time of day - you know, making small talk in the playground during the break. While we were chatting she said, quite out of the blue, "My mum says I have to tell her everything you tell me about God, Mrs. Coats - just in case you've got it wrong!" It took all my self-control not to burst out laughing - not because I felt "theologically superior" to her mother (or even the child!), but at the thought of the look of embarrassment on her mother's face if she found out her daughter had told me this. I knew her mother quite well. She was a member of one of the other churches in town and we did quite a few inter-church things together. She was also part of the Bible in schools team as I was - and I knew she would have felt quite abashed. Anyway I just smiled at the girl and informed her that in my role as Chaplain at the school I was not allowed to "teach" anyone about God. This was a State school and my role was purely pastoral - all I could do was to show God's love and care for people by trying to help them cope in their everyday lives.

When I thought about it later however, I realised that I actually can't teach anyone about God anyway. All I can do is share my experiences and understandings about God in the light of the story of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the teacher, I am merely a disciple, a pupil, a follower.

And this is what the Gospel writers did too isn't it? They wrote down and shared their experiences and understanding of Jesus in relationship to their own lives and their own situations in their time. And in their stories, just as in any story or on any journey, there has to be a beginning and a middle and an end. But often, as they found, and as you have probably found, that in any good story or journey, there is never quite a completion but a leading on to another new beginning - .....another new adventure...another learning...another understanding. And, as in many adventures or mystery tours, those starting out with Jesus, do not know where the way will lead or where and when the road will end. Furthermore, they do not even know much about their tour guide. Jesus simply calls them to "follow me." They do not know for certain where they are going, and who the "me" is that they are to follow. All this detail will be revealed on the journey.

This reminds me of a story I read in the Dom Post, some time back, about near death experiences. The reporter was writing about a claim from a neurosurgeon who had had such an experience. The surgeon was convinced that he had seen heaven and what was beyond death. The neurosurgeon had then written a book about his and other people's experiences, and because he was a brain scientist the argument was that it must be all true then. However the reviewer of the book wasn't convinced and finished his article with this anecdote:

There was a very well regarded Zen master whose pupil came to him and said, "Master, tell us what happens after death," and the Master replied, "Sorry, I don't know". "But sir, you are an eminent Zen Master." "Yes," the Master replied, "but I'm a living one."

So today, in this complex world, amidst the complexities that our various religious faiths and denominations try to place upon us, I want us to think about simply following Jesus here and now.

Just as we see in the story of Job and his walk with God, I believe that being a Christian doesn't necessarily mean that we understand everything about the Christian faith, or that we have achieved or can ever achieve perfection in following Jesus. It means we are simply disciples, those who are following behind Jesus in the journey of our daily lives. Faith in God through Jesus does not mean that we have arrived, faith means we are on the way. We have begun the journey.

Our Gospel reading today shows us that the disciples too are on that journey, and even though they have been on the road for some time with Jesus, they are still however behaving very much like new apprentices. While walking along the way, Jesus instructs his disciples in the nature of true leadership. James and John have been with Jesus long enough to suspect probably that their request will not make Jesus very happy, but like children they still ask, "*Teacher, will you do us a favour?*" Their concern focuses on their places in the kingdom when Jesus becomes king. Little do they comprehend yet, though they've already been told, that in reality Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem where his crown will be one of thorns, and Jesus' glory will be a cross with all its suffering and dying. Jesus asks the two brothers if they are sure this is what they want. Are they able to follow Jesus all the way to be "glorified" with him? "O yes, we are able," they innocently answer. James and John don't have a clue yet about the nature of Jesus' glory or about what it will require:

Jesus is thinking humiliation. They are thinking coronation. Jesus is thinking self-sacrifice. They are thinking self-aggrandisement. Jesus is thinking about being a servant. They are thinking about having servants. James and John sought places of privilege and power beside Jesus. They misunderstood what Jesus could do for them and what being close to Jesus would actually bring to them or them to. Whatever the consequences, the request itself angers the other disciples - they also do not yet understand. They are probably angry because James and John got in first - they too are envious of the prime positions in Jesus' kingdom.

Whenever I read this story, I can't help but think about various Christians debating about whose church or denomination is the most relevant and best to belong to. Whose doctrine and theology is right and whose is wrong. Who is fit for the kingdom of heaven and who is not. About who is "in" and who is "out". About who can serve and who can't.

Jesus tells us though that in the reign of God, rank and power have no place. The first become last, and the last first, the greatest the least. Here we are not talking about human ways, we are talking about God's ways. Those considered great will be lowly servants. The powerful will be those who seek solidarity with the powerless. Those who have the most are those who freely give away what they have. James and John base their request on a vision of lording it over others, being better and greater than others. In God's reign, Jesus models what it means to be "Lord". He expresses his lordship by giving his life for others.

From this story we learn that Christians are not those who are morally better than

other people or more perceptive or intelligent - we only have to look at the disciples in Mark's story to know this. We Christians are simply those who have heard our names called and have begun to follow Jesus.

In my first parish in Alexandra, one of my parishioners was the well known New Zealand artist, Douglas Badcock. He and I used to have some wonderful conversations about art and theology and the Holy Spirit. Douglas always insisted that anyone could paint but if you wanted to become a really good painter, a master of the art of painting, then you had to learn a whole range of skills, insights, facts and techniques - it can take a lifetime to become a great painter - a master - he said.

He said too that while you are "taking up" and developing an art like this, that art it is also "taking up" and developing you - it is mastering you. This is because painting is a physical act. You simply cannot know some idea about the craft, you must absorb it into the body, down to the tips of the fingers. It must move from head through your heart, to your hand and brush. Therefore much of the time training is spent on attempting to master the body, trying to get the fingers to move where they are supposed to move, mastering the right gesture in the arm, and so forth.

Time must be set aside each day for the practise of painting, and the rest of your life is organised around painting, in order for you to master the craft. After a time, and with practise, the knowledge of painting moves from the head to the heart, to the hands and back again. The painter has been changed. Douglas described his work as a spiritual experience. Expressing God through painting.

I think today's Gospel implies that it is much the same with Jesus. When we take up the cross and follow him he takes us to places which, as human beings, we can never imagine. The disciplines of discipleship - daily prayer or meditation, reading the Scriptures, seeking knowledge and understanding, reaching out to the needy and the vulnerable, practicing peace and justice, being inclusive of those on the margins of society, - simply caring for our neighbour, form us while we practise them. In the very acts required to follow Jesus we become transformed. We don't master discipleship, rather discipleship involves a willingness to let the Master have his way with our lives.

Like Job, James and John, we have to realise we are not the Lord of the universe, but mere human beings, whose lives will not be specially protected, but instead deeply blessed when we set out on our journey of faith being mastered by the Master. Whether we come from large churches or small, whether we are rich or poor, powerful or weak, young or old, it matters not, all we are asked to do is to simply follow Jesus and learn from him. Amen.