

Sunday reflection for Sunday the 6th February 2022:

Honest Questions and difficult truths:

Mark 9:30-37

(read vs 1-2 at start of address)

We All learn LIFE LESSONS as we tramp gently (or not so!),
...along life's path

I'm particularly mindful of this topic at the moment,
....because I'm in the process of revalidating my nurse registration -

Every 3 years you have to gather EVIDENCE to submit,
...to the nursing and midwifery council,
.....to PROVE you've kept up to date.

- Evidence of the hours you've practiced
- The positive feedback you've received from colleagues and staff
- The number of hours spent on courses
- Etc, etc....

...and the PROFESSIONALS LIFE LESSONS you've learnt via a minimum number of formal written reflections.

I'M IN THE MIDDLE OF WRITING THESE UP,
.... IN A LEGIBLE FASHION AT THE MOMENT.

MY professional revalidation comes round every 3 years,
....so I'm reflecting on incidents across this 3 PAST YEAR PERIOD.

SIMILARLY, Mark (our gospels author)
...is doing something similar to me:

...the text we are reading today,
....is, in effect, a small section in a longer written reflection,
.....that also spans a 3 year period.

The disciples shared 3 years of their path with Jesus - IN PERSON

Q - imagine the INTENSIVE BARRAGE of life lessons -
...that must have produced

I don't know about you -
....but it's the uncomfortable ones that I can seem to recall most vividly!

This was certainly the case for a colleague in ministry,
...whom I met years ago,

in the newly accredited ministers conference,
.... in MARKET HARBOROUGH,
.....that I and other newbie ministers were obliged to attend.

We were paired up for this one session,
...and told to take turns sharing one important lesson,
.....that we had learnt thus far in our short ministerial experience.

The framework we were given -
....involved us opening with the conclusion (what we had learned)

then we had to go back in time,
... to describe the event/life experience,
..... that had birthed the important discovery.

I went first -

...we had a good chuckle (and no, I'm not going to share it with you)

.....then it was his turn.

The lesson I learnt - he intoned,

...was NEVER to take TOO LITERALLY the invitation to:

'Look - tell me honestly' OR 'be straight with me' OR 'please be completely frank'

Then he went back in time to describe the hard won learning -

He said how he had visited the MOTHER of one of his youth club members -

SHE WAS AN INFLUENTIAL LADY IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH,

...she was ALSO a rather intense lady,

.....perhaps even a little over-protective he said.

The 17 year old lad had formed a trusting bond with his new minister -

...and for the first time ever,

.....he had begun opening up to another person,

.....about the difficulties he experienced with his mother

He loved her,

But he also felt a bit suffocated by her,

...and he told me that he wanted her to stop,

..... putting him on the perfect son pedestal

HE couldn't be open with her -

..he'd tried and failed numerous times

...but he was tired of tiptoeing and pretending around her

.....tired of her weighing in and trying to fight all of his battles

THE FIRST PROBLEM WAS THIS -

...she felt that he was exceptionally vulnerable -

She believed he was a highly sensitive boy:

...a trait caused by his gentle nature,
.....and his exceptionally strong creative streak,

AS FAR AS SHE WAS CONCERNED -

...once he went to uni and qualified as a Dr (her career path for him),
.....and met the right girl,
(The sort who'd appreciate how lucky she was,
..... and dote on him for the rest of their lives!)

= HE'D BE FINE

Trouble was -

...he didn't want to go into medicine -
.....he wanted to be a CHEF

and coming back to the whole 'meet a nice girl' cure -
..... He was GAY - VERY

They say that a mother's love is blind -

...well my colleague said the youth club member,
.....was just about the campest lad he had ever met in real life!

The lad wanted his mum to know the truth -

(About his sexuality, job aspirations and need for space from her)

.....but didn't have the guts to tell his mum to her face.

But he had given his new minister -

PERMISSION TO SPEAK OPENLY with his MUM.

And so my colleague described to me how he sat,

....a pretty new and inexperienced pastor,
.....cradling his tea as he faced the lads mother,
.....across her kitchen table

She knew that he was there,
... to tell her something important about her son

And he took her at her word,
...as she asked him to give her,
... the complete honest and unvarnished truth about her son

He paused in his narration - shook his head
...and admitted to me that he had been so very naive that day

You've heard the phrase - DON'T SHOOT THE MESSENGER?
.....well he said he felt less shot -
.....than hung drawn and quartered!

DESPITE - using every diplomatic skill,
..... that he possessed!

What rubbed salt in his wound,
...was when she demanded that her son come to the kitchen table -
.....and confronted him with my 'LIES' the minister had just told her
.....the lad had LOOKED LIKE A FRIGHTENED RABBIT,
.....and spluttered 'he must be making it all up mum'

He told me - "I LEARNED A LOT THAT DAY"

He learnt that the invitation to 'tell me the truth' -
...can sometimes really be an instruction to tell them THE VERSION OF THE TRUTH that they want to hear

(Re-affirm their existing beliefs -

....not challenge them)

I suppose I've encountered this phenomenon many times myself - (although perhaps not so overtly as that poor new minister!) -

= this is the human propensity to CLOSE YOUR MIND,

..... to any answer/fact,

.....>>that challenges your meticulously constructed perception of the world

And if I'm honest -

...I don't like being confronted with unwelcome truths,

.....or reality checks either - DO YOU?

AND YET IT'S A FUNDAMENTAL PART OF DISCIPLESHIP

Like the preacher DAVID WILKINSON once said -

....can a comfortable Christian be a true disciple?

.....>>>> after all - God challenges those he calls.

We see this with those FIRST disciples throughout the GOSPELS - = they encounter uncomfortable truths about;

- Themselves
- The world around them
- Even their perceptions (sometimes false) - about God himself

Can you relate to the disciples?

There are lots of points in the gospels -

...when followers or would be followers:

..... ask questions of Jesus,

.....and receive answers they'd rather not hear

- Such as rich young man (how can i get eternal life - 'just one more thing....')

- Or 'who's the greatest' - the least who makes themselves smaller than the rest and serves everyone
- Or 'shall we send this huge crowd in towns and villages to get food' - NO, you feed them!

Etc, etc.....

Sometimes (like us) the Disciples ask questions,

.....but really they only want to hear their preferred or expected answer

(perhaps we could call these disingenuous questions -

..or FALSE ones)

But we see another human phenomenon occur in today's text -

= Avoiding the truth isn't just about asking the 'FALSE question'

.....sometimes it's about -

'avoiding asking the question at all'

In the hymn 'Have thine own way Lord',

....There's the line - 'search me and try me'

....I squirm everytime I sing it

= sometimes it's a question I don't feel comfortable asking

so-

JESUS - with his friends in tow,

....is heading from Caesarea back towards Capernum,

.....along the western shore of the Sea of Galilee

This is one of his LOW KEY TRIPS -

....he's deliberately avoiding meeting people,

..... so he can spend some quality time with his friends

= some quality TEACHING time

Aah - wouldn't that be lovely -

..Instead of sitting here in Pisgah listening to the monkey waffle on,
.....being taught directly by the organ grinder instead

Walking - taking - listening to Jesus ... IN PERSON!

I read a sunday magazine article a while back,
....describing a survey which had asked folks to name who'd they like to invite to dinner,
..... if they could have ANYONE (dead - or alive)

Alongside the NELSON MANDELA'S, OSCAR WILDE'S, and CATHERINE ZETA JONES,
....came JESUS.

= even among many non-Christians,
....there was a fascination with this humble middle-eastern peasant,
.....who'd shaped so much of our history and culture,
.....and become the most quoted human in the whole of history

Wouldn't it be great ey -
...to jump into the shoes of the disciples,
..... and BE TAUGHT BY JESUS?!

GREAT -but comfortable?
-why would we find it any more comfortable than they did?

Certainly no asking FALSE QUESTIONS
(questions where we only wanted the answers we like)

The GOSPEL OF MARK only scratches the surface,
....of what was talked about

(they had days together so there must have been TONS MORE)

.....But MARK only mentions ONE topic of teaching,

= The IMPORTANCE OF HIS HAVING TO LAY DOWN HIS LIFE

Who wrote MARK? (silly question - MARK of course)

....but who DICTATED MARK? -

= well, probably PETER

(which is why some people informally refer to this as Peters Gospel)

SO - one of the people being taught,

... is recalling this TEACHING TRIP in our reading -

= and the bit he remembers is the REALLY UNCOMFORTABLE BIT.

(as I said at the start -

...isn't it often the UNCOMFORTABLE lessons that stay most vividly?)

JESUS is repeating a teaching he's delivered before

...but on that occasion EARLIER IN MARK -

.....Peter refused to listen to it (too uncomfortable)

JESUS had said THEN - as he repeats NOW:

"The son of man will be humiliated and killed"

(he also mentioned RAISED TO LIFE afterwards -

but they seemed too shellshocked by the 1st bit to process that)

Do you remember how PETER had responded to this 'I must die' statement,

.....the first time?

"You shall NOT die!"

Peter couldn't take Jesus 'telling him like it is'

(and Peter earned himself a real telling off from Jesus in the process)

- Peter had had a nice comfortable perception about how saviours do their thing
- And Jesus had spoiled it with a straight truth

When that NEWLY ACCREDITED MINISTER,

....had spoken to the youth group Lad's mum-

....and she responded angrily (like Peter),

.....to a truth that didn't fit in with her perception of the world

= HE LEFT IT AT THAT -

and told the lad that he couldn't intervene for him again

(ONCE BITTEN - TWICE SHY)

But JESUS doesn't LEAVE IT AT THAT with Peter!

.....In the GOSPELS this lesson is repeated,

.....again and again and again by Jesus

And - AS WE COME CLOSER TO CAPERNAUM in our text

...He repeats it AGAIN!!

But although PETER didn't recognise the truth that previous time -

(when he foolishly jumped in and corrected Jesus)

.....he HAD learnt one lesson

- =this time when Jesus starts talking about having to die and be humiliated,
-Peter KEEPS HIS MOUTH SHUT

No FEET FIRST this time -

....now it's cautious Peter

-last time his FINGER was metaphorically wagging as he tried to correct Jesus

-this time his FINGER is metaphorically in his ear to block Jesus out

= we know this is true,

... because despite all the teaching about 'what will happen to Jesus'

.....they still don't get it until AFTER he is resurrected

I said we relate to the disciples -

- Don't we also ask false questions?
- Only want the answers that fit our comfortable view on truth?
- Don't we also put our fingers in our ears and hum loudly sometimes
- Well - I DO, at least!

Thank GOD we have a persistently graceful God,

....he PRODS, and URGES, and REPEATS his lessons

Slowly ---- patiently ----- moving us forward..

Even though we do leave HEEL MARKS,

..... in the ground as we try to resist!

He's patiently coming back,

.. to this UNCOMFORTABLE BUT NECESSARY teaching -

....WITH THE DISCIPLES

....but he moves them on,

.....TO A NEW LEVEL OF DISCOMFORT

In THIS teaching he adds a single word that he didn't use previously - 'Betray'

Dying and being humiliated is one thing -

...but 'betray' implies that someone close to him is responsible.

An ENEMY can't betray you -

...but a FRIEND or a FOLLOWER can

Suddenly Jesus make this teaching SO much more personal -

PETER doesn't jump in this time - OH NO,

....32 "they did not understand his saying and were afraid to ask him"

Fingers in his ears -

....now become fingers over his mouth (mime)

One commentator on this passage,

..... explains why he thinks the disciples were afraid to ask questions:

"They fear that if they ask, they find that they will find Judas in their hearts"

It wasn't just Judas who betrayed Jesus -

- Peters 3 denials outside chief priests court
- Where were his other friends in his darkest hour?

Perhaps I'd rather not sing - SEARCH ME, TRY ME -

....= because i might discover,

..... that I'm not as nice and decent as I like to imagine

Just like that mum I mentioned,

.... didn't want to hear the truth of her son -

....= because she was afraid that she might feel a failure as a mum

SO - FINALLY -

Why DOES God challenge us - tell us 'like it is'

- To make us uncomfortable?

NO -

If he's going to sort THIS disciple out,
....then he's going to have to clean me from the inside out

He won't FORCE ME/YOU - (salvation is an invitation)

But if are going to give him our permission,
..... to "Have thine own way" in us (as the hymnist puts it)

= we have to 1st accept that this FACADE
= is not the whole truth

I need to look into the mirror,
...and accept that I have BETRAYED him too
(I'm a hypocrite disciple too)

That I share some responsibility,
.... for Jesus' DEATH and HUMILIATION

That each act of selfishness or self-righteousness,
..... helped NAIL him to the cross

Read JOHN 3:16

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life"

Now listen to that again,
....but replace the word WORLD with your NAME

Repeat John 3:16

(and pause and say nothing in place where you say world)

GOD can wash us clean -

...but we have to hand over our dirty linen 1st

= and that's NEVER comfortable.

Amen.