

are we listening?
 a sermon preached on the
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the lections: Jeremiah 11.18-20; Psalm 54; James 3.1-12; Mark 9. 30-37

When God is trying to say something to us, how good are we at listening?
 That's the question N.T. Wright asks of this passage and I think it is the question for us today.

30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 31 for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." 32 But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

It is not surprising on one level the disciples found it hard.
 Sometimes it can be really hard to understand.
 Earlier in the gospel Jesus has spoken in code and the disciples haven't got it.
 Jesus had to explain the secret hidden meaning of the parables to his disciples in private.
 And Jesus has wanted them to look for a deeper meaning
 like when he warned them about the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod.

Now he tells the disciples what he means quite literally.
 It's not public teaching – Mark makes it clear Jesus doesn't want anyone to know he is passing through Galilee as he is teaching his disciples.
 Jesus is repeating what he has already told the disciples in chapter 8:31:
 after the Twelve have recognised him as the Messiah,
 Jesus redefines what that means – he is the suffering messiah.

The disciples are looking for a hidden meaning and can't find it.
 Was he perhaps talking about the suffering that would herald the arrival of the kingdom?
 Yes, but not the way they thought.

Jesus is simply trying to tell his disciples what he can see is going to happen.
 He will be handed over; he will be killed; he will rise again.

In chapter 8 Jesus has emphasised his rejection by the major factions of the Sanhedrin.
 They will kill him and after three days he will rise.
 Now Jesus emphasises he will be betrayed or handed over,

Judas Iscariot was identified as Jesus' betrayer when he is first mentioned as one of the Twelve (3:19).

And when Jesus goes to Jerusalem, he will be handed over by Judas to the chief priests, to Pilate, and finally to the soldiers who crucify him.

Rejection from the religious establishment one thing. Betrayal by a friend was another.

Why couldn't they understand?

Basically because it just wasn't part of their game plan for the Messiah, Their understanding, their long held understanding, of what a Messiah might do. Real messiahs don't die.

This side of the cross we can take it for granted.

Probably not all Jews of the time believed that God would send a Messiah;

But nobody at all believed that, if and when God did send one, that Messiah would have to suffer, still less have to die.

It can be hard to understand.

Jesus so often spoke figuratively that it's not surprising his literal sense (betrayed, killed, rising again) was too much for them to swallow.

And to add to their confusion, the language Jesus used for saying this contained two phrases which could have been used as code for something else.

Firstly the son of man – simply an indirect way of saying 'I' – which is how it was meant and quickly understood in 8:31.

But of course the phrase also carries echoes of the great dream-picture in Daniel 7 where one like a son of man, duly interpreted, refers to people of the saints of the most high.

Secondly after three days he will rise.

Though most Jews believed that would raise the dead bodily at the end of the present age, they were not expecting that one person would rise from the dead while the present age continued on its way.

What on earth – literally – was he talking about?

It can be hard to understand.

Think of the issues challenging the church, challenging Christians, today.

It is not always easy to understand what the scriptures are saying, how to read them – literally, metaphorically, as poetry; let alone what it means to apply that meaning to today.

Exegesis is one thing, hermeneutics another.

The fact that I am standing before you today as a Bishop is an example of the church hearing what God is saying despite long held beliefs over many centuries.

But we can also understand enough that we don't want to understand more.

As with the disciples: they understood enough to be afraid to ask to understand more.

They could guess the answer would be one they would not want to hear – especially after Jesus' alarming response when Peter questioned the wisdom of going to Jerusalem – what it meant for Jesus to be the suffering Messiah - in chapter 8.

Understanding can cost.

When God is trying to say something to us, how good are we at listening?
 Do we do the same thing as the disciples.
 Is there something in scripture, or something we've heard in church or something we sense going on around us, through which God is speaking to us – and if so, are we open to it?
 Or are we fearful of the cost?
 Are we prepared to have our earlier ways of understanding things taken apart so that a new way of understanding can open up instead?

A sign that the answer may still be 'no' is if, like the disciples in the next verses, we are still concerned about our own status, about what is in it for us.
 While Jesus' eyes are fixed on martyrdom, they are preoccupied with the question of status.
 While Jesus is talking of rejection and death, they are apparently thinking of a continuing movement in which leadership will be an issue.

One might wonder whether this incident was in the mind of James when he wrote his letter. How we use our tongue, what we talk about. James will go on to speak of envy and selfish ambition in the next verses – as opposed to wisdom and understanding.
 If our mind is on our own prestige, our own sense of self worth or even our bank balance then we are very unlikely to be able to hear what Jesus is actually saying.

It can be hard to understand, it can be hard to hear, but it is important we do:

33 Then they came to Capernaum;

it had been the centre of the Galilean ministry in chapters 1-6
and when he was in the house

most probably Peter's - Jesus' adopted home.

he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?"

Jesus' questions often preceded important teaching.

34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

Jesus has spoken about glory.

About the kingdom of God come with power, followed by his transfiguration.

They were convinced that the age of God's Messiah was about to dawn.

But what would be their place in the kingdom of God?

They are simply reflecting the practices and values of their day – a preoccupation with status and position.

Their silence, though, is a sign they know they should have known better!

35 He sat down,

again this is important teaching: rabbis customarily sat to teach.

called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

Jesus' first saying reverses all expectations of greatness.

Wanting to be first but being the very last – providing for the needs of others.

That is what it means to be servant of all.

It is not the only time Jesus will make the point.

The teaching given is paralleled many times in the synoptic tradition (eg Mk 10:43-44).

In John it is memorably symbolised in the footwashing.

This is such a radical challenge to how we normally think that it needs constant repetition.

And to try and jolt them out of that Jesus uses a child as an illustration, a parable in action:

36 *Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms,*

We can idealise childhood in the modern Western world.

Children would have been loved by their families but they were not rated highly in the ancient world – they had no status or prestige. (And even now – most children just want to grow up).

Jesus took a little child and had him stand among them;

then as a separate deliberate action, he took him in his arms.

By picking up the child, Jesus had symbolically received and welcomed him.

Jesus the first and the greatest, had made himself the last by serving the child.

The child is an example and also a promise:

he said to them, 37 “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

The one who sent me – a way of referring to God which may remind us more of John’s gospel.

In other words, anyone at all associated with Jesus can become the means of access to royalty, and even to divinity;

Not least in the person of an insignificant child.

The disciples aren’t special in that sense at all.

Friendship with God is on offer, as in James, but it will mean turning one’s back on friendship with the world and its expectations.

They were each hoping, it seems, to become Jesus’ official spokesman.

Who would speak for Jesus?

Who would be his ambassador, welcomed with the honour due to Jesus himself?

Answer: anyone at all, and the humbler the better.

An insignificant, unnamed child can become Jesus’ official representative,

So that receiving him or her means receiving Jesus.

The disciples won’t gain particular favour or social standing because they are his followers.

The disciples are not the only ones who struggle with this, who struggle to have the right attitude.

Many have thought over many centuries that being close to Jesus, even working full-time for him, made them somehow special.

If you really understand Jesus message you know that things aren’t like that.

As Jesus goes to the cross, turning upside down everything his disciples had imagined, he is also turning upside down the way people, including Christians, still think. Where do we be reminded of the basic truth we are all special in God's sight, we all have access to him?

Who might we be surprised to see God choosing to work through –
Proclaiming his message, drawing people into His kingdom.

When God is trying to say something to us, how good are we at listening?