

James 3:13 – 4:3 Mark 9: 30 – 37
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As you know we have been working through the book of James as set out by the Lectionary cycle of Year B that we are in and that I follow and James has a particular way of bringing the message forward. The writer of James only mentions Jesus twice in his writings yet it seems that he is writing to a structured Christian community. Much of what James is saying can be paralleled in the Jewish Wisdom traditions. Many of us can read James and agree that this is how it should be, how we should live; and we may even think that we do live this way...but...

The book of James is a prophetic voice and we the people in the pews in ancient times and today do not like a prophetic voice. The prophetic voice reveals too much of who we really are, warts and all. The prophetic voice puts the elephant squarely in the room and names it and we really don't like that; we don't like to be called on our words and actions or to be held accountable for our words and actions and in this book, this writer is doing just that; Calling us to account. The prophet is saying we are mean-spirited, boastful, we twist the truth, we will do anything even resort to violence to get what we want.

The writer uses hard language and a good dose of tough love to teach us to hold the mirror to our own faces; face our own demons; admit our own shortcomings; and to use mercy to treat each other with dignity and honour.

It should come as no surprise that this reading is matched with the gospel of Mark where we see Jesus' attempt at bringing the disciples back to earth when he overhears them discussing who among them is the greatest. He begins by reminding them for the second time that he will be arrested, tried and killed and then he asks them what they were discussing on the road to Capernium. The disciples are caught and busted so to speak. They have to come clean on their discussion. So you want to be first place? Then take the last place. Be the servant of all." You might notice it does not say "a servant TO all" but rather "a servant OF all".

This difference in wording and this statement is, according to Karen Baker-Fletcher a lesson in the spiritual discipline of authentic humility in relation to God. She states, "One does not become great in God's eyes through human ambition, competition and achievement. Bickering and strife against one another are not the answers to greatness. To the contrary greatness in god's eyes involves spiritual humility, divine grace and love of others."

To illustrate his point Jesus then takes a child who was in the room and Jesus lifts the child up. Now this may not seem on the surface that big of a deal however, once again we must recognise the social context of the times to fully understand the radical ideas and lessons of Jesus. Children in ancient times had no social standing, the lowest of lows. They were commodities to be used to keep your family line going, to improve your social standing, to be traded and paired in marriage to better yourself. Jesus picks the child up and places them centre stage in the conversation. This is big! He puts his arms around her and welcomes her into the circle of gathered adults. This is just not done in ancient society. This is a radical move on Jesus part. Jesus, the prophet, the Messiah. Once again doing the unthinkable, crossing

the line of status quo, pushing the envelope and telling the people what they may NOT want to hear.

If you are to be great, you must welcome the lowest, not just onto the property or into the house but into the heart of the community. You have to mean it! You have to live it! Oh the book of James; bringing us to the brink, getting on our last nerve, forcing us to go where we don't want to go. The message of the gospel; the gospel, the good news as we call it, is not for the faint of heart.

I remember when the AIDS agency I worked for had visitors from the Umgani AIDS Centre in Qua Zulu Natal visiting us. They were amazed by two things: one was that the toilets flushed in the opposite direction than in South Africa; the other was that we valued our children. Our school busses stopped traffic in both directions; we had signs up indicating play areas and school crossings. People were careful with the children. This is not the reality in other parts of the world. We take it for granted and our children here are treated with much more respect than other places but we still fall short. We still have children who go to school hungry in a country filled with fresh produce, children who live in substandard housing, children who are abused and exploited.

And it is not just the children. It has a ripple effect to those who care for our youngest children: day care and pre-school teachers and nannies are among the lowest paid and are less valued than those who have "useful" jobs like say hockey players who make millions of dollars a year. Imagine what could be done with the money if we took just one million from every sports figure who makes multi-millions of dollars to play a sport and put it into our day care centres.

It is said that Fred Rogers, a Presbyterian minister, the man whose television show, Mister Rogers Neighbourhood reached children all over the world, always stooped to greet children before greeting any adults in the room. He stooped, he went down to their level, recognising that children are lost in a sea of legs, and spoke to each child before acknowledging the adults in the room.

The story in Mark says this, "Then, cradling the little one in his arms, he said, "Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me – God who sent me."

If we embrace one another as this passage in Mark suggests then the prophetic words spoken in the book of James can be easily read and absorbed with no uncomfortable feelings around the words. We would no longer be the spoiled children of the world wanting our own way and fighting, even killing for an elusive reward or to be the greatest.

The tough words of the prophets call us to account. The tough actions of Jesus call us to model these words. What will we discuss on our road, who is the greatest among us or who is the lowest that we can serve with full and accepting hearts?