

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Wisdom 2:12, 17-20; Psalm 54 [53]; James 3:16-4:3; Mark 9:30-37

Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all

Mark 9:30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. Jesus 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.

9:33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” 34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” 36 Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, 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.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is the second of the three Passion Predictions, which serve to structure the teaching found in Mark 8-10. It is found within the longer section 9:30-10:31. The divisions here are very clear: first you have the prediction (30-32), followed by misunderstanding (33-34), followed by a positive teaching and example (35-37).

KIND OF WRITING

See the box overleaf for the Markan pattern across chapters 8, 9 and 10. The first scene in Sequence 2 is a passion prediction. Jesus surely foresaw his death. However, in the tradition, the details have been added after the event to make the predictions clearer. The instance in today’s text, however, may reflect a more primitive form of the tradition (“hand of sinners”, “killed”) precisely because it is less detailed.

The middle scene illustrates the hand of writer. The disciples are silent and remain so, presumably because they are ashamed. The writer himself has to supply the information in an explanatory note. Such explanatory asides abound in this Gospel: Mark 1:16, 22; 2:15; 3:10, 21; 5:42; 6:17-18, 20, 31; 6:52; 7:3; 9:6, 31, 34; 10:22; 11:13, 18, 32; 12:12; 14:40, 56; 15:10; 16:8.

The last scene is an action *chreia*, whereby a teaching is dramatised and then expressed in words, for greater clarity. It constitutes a prophetic gesture, familiar from the Old Testament and, of course, from the ministry of Jesus himself.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6:8)

When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but wisdom is with the humble. (Prov 11:2)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” (Mark 10:15)

If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” (Mark 6:11)

Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. Then he answered them, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. But the chief priests

Thought for the day

Jeremiah, who knew a thing or two about the human condition, wrote: *The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse— who can understand it?* (Jer 17:9) A healthy introspection (it need not be introversion!) is essential, if we are to become *free from* inherited drives and *free for* service.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, let me know myself and know you, and desire nothing except you alone. Let me hate myself and love you. Let me do everything for your sake. Let me humble myself and exalt you. Let me think of nothing except you. Let me die to myself and live in you. Let me accept whatever happens as from you. Let me banish self and follow you, And ever desire to follow you.

from St Augustine

stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. Pilate spoke to them again, “Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?” They shouted back, “Crucify him!” Pilate asked them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him!” So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. (Mark 15:6–15)

ST PAUL

For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of

Sequence 1	Sequence 2	Sequence 3
Passion Prediction 8:31	Passion Prediction 9:30-31	Passion Prediction 10:33-34
Misunderstanding 8:32-33 (Peter) Rejects the cross	Misunderstanding 9:32-34 (The Twelve) Who is the greatest?	Misunderstanding 10:35-37 (James, John) Request for glory
Discipleship 8:34-38 Cost for the individual	Discipleship 9:35-50 Service of the community	Discipleship 10:38-44 Leadership

the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day. (1 Cor 4:9-13)

When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais; and we greeted the believers and stayed with them for one day. The next day we left and came to Caesarea; and we went into the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the seven, and stayed with him. He had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy. While we were staying there for several days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. He came to us and took Paul's belt, bound his own feet and hands with it, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is the way the Jews in



Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'" When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." Since he would not be persuaded, we remained silent except to say, "The Lord's will be done." (Acts 21:7-14)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 30 They are on the journey to Jerusalem and the public ministry in Galilee is over. Jesus' desire for anonymity is typical of Mark's Gospel. As was observed before, this may well reflect a real desire of the historical Jesus, which was strengthened by the evangelist for his own purposes. Mark is answering a difficult question: after all the preparation, how was it that most Jews did not recognise Jesus as Messiah? His answer is also difficult: this happened on purpose in order that salvation might thereby be extended to non-Jews.

Verse 31 "Son of Man" is Jesus' own self-designation, taken from the book of Daniel 7:13-14. The word "betrayed" in Greek has two meanings: it means to be betrayed and it means to be handed over. Because the verb used is in the passive voice, God is taken to be the acting subject. Believers do not normally think of God as "betraying" Jesus, but rather of God as "handing over" Jesus. This is the earliest usage, found also in Paul with no reference whatsoever to Judas Iscariot. The lack of detail is quite noticeable here and perhaps we are closer to the earlier tradition at this point, as noted above.

Verse 32 It is a feature of Mark that the disciples do not understand. This must seem historically improbable after the previous instruction (!), but, of course, Mark's purpose is to show up the disciples in a very bad light. The argument would go something like this: if even those closest to Jesus did not grasp the place of suffering in his destiny and in their own discipleship, how much more...?

Verse 33 Presumably we are meant to think of Peter's house at Capernaum. Characteristically, teaching for *insiders* is given *indoors*.

Verse 34 Silent: see the range of occurrences in Mark 3:4; 4:39; 9:34; 10:48; 14:61. Greatest: a very normal question in society, then as well as now. We are not yet talking about who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven, but more nakedly, who is the greatest, pure and simple.

Verse 35 The introduction to the teaching and action is quite formal. The teaching itself can be found in different contexts in the Gospels: Mark 10:43-44; Matt 20:26-27; 23:12-12; Lk 9:48; 22:26.

Verse 36 The elaborate introduction again prepares us for the illustration of what is meant. A child in this culture is a symbol of powerlessness (cf. *My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father* [Gal 4:1-3]). Both the Aramaic and the Greek behind the word "child" could mean servant as much as child.

Verse 37 To welcome a child means to serve the weakest and most powerless. In this way, the disciple encounters the Risen Lord. The idea behind it is that in welcoming an emissary you welcome the sender: in a child you welcome Christ and in Christ you welcome God. "The one who sent me" becomes almost a name for God in the Gospel according to John.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Jesus uses the time they are travelling along the road to teach his disciples what it means to be one of his followers. Think of the wisdom you have acquired about life, about faith, about what it means to be a Christian. Who have been your teachers? Remember them and give thanks for them.

2. One of the lessons Jesus gives them is that there is a dying to be endured as we move to a fuller life. That was the road he would travel. It is also our journey, not only at the end of this earthly life, but also in small ways through life. When have you found that by dying in some way you came to a fuller life?

3. Achievement, affirmation, recognition and status are attractive and enjoyable when they come our way. Yet we can be in trouble if, like the disciples, we become caught up in pursuit of them. Jesus tells them that true greatness lies in service of others. What has helped you to appreciate the value of loving service of others? When have you experienced the service of others to you?

PRAYER

O God, protector of the poor and defender of the just, in your kingdom the last become first, the gentle are strong, and the lowly exalted. Give us the wisdom from above, that we may find in your servant Jesus the pattern of true discipleship and the grace to persevere in following him, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy

James 3:13 *Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. 15 Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.*

Jas 3:16 For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Jas 4:1 Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? 2 You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

James 4:4 *Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. 5 Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, "God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? 6 But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."*

7 *Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Something of the sheer practicality and plainness of James comes to eloquent, even awkward, expression here.

The direct address in the second part is a clever technique because we all feel he is speaking to me/us.

KIND OF WRITING

Wisdom reflection in the Hebrew Scriptures included very practical reflections on ethical behaviour. This is what we have here. Wisdom is not an elite intellectual pursuit; it is, rather, that discernment of what is truly good and having the courage to live it.

Our passage comes from within a wider train of thought within the letter.

God and the world (3:13-4:10)

3:13-18 Contrasting wisdoms

4:1-3 Passions and the world

4:4-6 Contrasting friendships

4:7-10 Exhortations

We enter the debate at v. 16. The introductory verses, added above, help to make sense of the passage. The concluding verses, also added, do not lack forcefulness!! James 4:8a is simple and powerful.

ORIGIN OF THE READINGS

The old catechism spoke of the effects of original sin which endured even after Baptism, as if we needed reminding that we carry our human nature into our Christian existence! It may help to repeat that within the Christian polity, conflict is *normal*. We tend to feel it ought not to be there and this can lead to flight into (a false) spirituality at the local level and to silencing of real debate at the level of leadership. James puts us straight.

RELATED PASSAGES

But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable (*akatastatos*) in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord. (James 1:6-7)

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. (Gal 5:22-23)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 16 The marks of false, so-called wisdom are named in v. 15. Here, James

illustrates his teaching in practice. Chaos (*akastasia*) is also mentioned earlier in 1:8.

Verse 17 The list is not unlike the list in Gal 5:22-23 (above). Paul attributes these fruits to the Spirit, whereas James attributes them to the wisdom which comes from God. There is no contradiction. The virtues described are essential if life in the community is to be wholesome and healthy.

Verse 18 This sounds like some kind of proverbial, familiar saying, included here as part of the persuasion. The Greek has fruit (NRSV = harvest). It is slightly odd to speak of sowing a fruit; hence there are two ways of reading this verse. It could be as above in the NRSV, or thus: peace is the fruit of righteousness that is sown in peace by those who make peace. Righteousness includes acting mercifully.

Verse 1 Two rhetorical questions, in the form of diatribe (direct address), take us more deeply into community conflict. The addition of "among you" keeps the discussion quite local and practical. "Cravings" represents the Greek *hēdonē*, whence our word hedonism. It means here passions out of control (perhaps it always does!). The second question is formed to trigger the answer "yes."

Verse 2 The reference here is to the Tenth Commandment. Unscrupulous and uncontrolled desire is simply destructive. Asking is very important in James—he means first of all asking *from God*, a process of spiritual discernment.

Verse 3 Even if you do ask, it is not in the right way. The word *hēdonē* (cravings) reappears in its more usual sense, forming an *inclusion* with v. 1.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. We could pray for those values and strengths mentioned in v. 17. Usually we need them in everyday situations.

2. Am I in a situation of conflict / anger at the moment? It might be good to examine my own heart and its motives.

3. What is it I really want? The real gifts we need are truly from another source and we should not be afraid to ask.

PRAYER

Compassionate God, you read our hearts more accurately than we do ourselves. Help us to know ourselves that we may know you. Help to know you, source of all wisdom, that we may know ourselves and be wise. Through Christ, your wisdom and our Lord. Amen.

Let us lie in wait for the righteous man

Wis. 2:12 “Let us lie in wait for the righteous man,
because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions;
he reproaches us for sins against the law,
and accuses us of sins against our training.

- 17 Let us see if his words are true,
and let us test what will happen at the end of his life;
- 18 for if the righteous man is God’s child, he will help him,
and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries.
- 19 Let us test him with insult and torture,
so that we may find out how gentle he is,
and make trial of his forbearance.
- 20 Let us condemn him to a shameful death,
for, according to what he says, he will be protected.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our OT reading portrays the call of the faithful in difficult times. It is hard to be faithful when your efforts are derided and dismissed.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The Wisdom of Solomon seems to have been written around the turn of the era, that is, c. 30 BC. It was written by a highly educated, articulate Jew who was much influenced by Greek culture and philosophy. The book is a sophisticated attempt to draw young Jewish men away from the attractions of Greco-Roman culture and to reassure them that what they were seeking there was to be found right here in their own tradition, rightly understood. In a word, the writer is doing what we all have to do: to negotiate a tradition into a new cultural context.

The Wisdom of Solomon may be presented in three parts, as follows:

- I** 1-6 – An invitation to Wisdom contrasting good and bad people.
- II** 7-9 – Solomon’s prayer for and praise of Wisdom.
- III** 10-19 – A review of the OT from Adam to Moses

KIND OF WRITING

The first part of the book contrasts two choices of life-style, in a robust yet subtle contrast between good and evil choices. It is laid out in a complex system of comparisons and contrasts, more or less as above in the box.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The book of Wisdom—written in Greek and a very late Biblical book—has strong roots in the Hebrew Bible.

A. Exhortation to Justice (1:1-15)
 B. Speech of the impious (1:16-2:24)
 C. Four diptychs contrasting the impious and the just (3:1-4:20)
 3:1-12 reward v. punishment
 3:13-19 blessed v. dishonour
 4:1-6 virtue v. evil
 4:7-20 rest v. anguish
 B¹. Speech of the impious (5:1-23)
 A¹. Exhortation to Wisdom (6:1-21)

It was the Lord who made it known to me, and I knew; then you showed me their evil deeds. But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. And I did not know it was against me that they devised schemes, saying, “Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will no longer be remembered!” But you, O Lord of hosts, who judge righteously, who try the heart and the mind, let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause. (Jer 11:18–20)

O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. (Psa 25:2)

But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, “You are my God.” (Psa 31:14)

In this passage, the writer is in direct dialogue with the Suffering Servant songs from Third Isaiah. One example will suffice:

Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as

one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. (Is 53:1–5)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 12 The writer goes behind the actions of the wicked to their motives for action. The good person makes them stand out and for them he is “inconvenient.” The third and fourth lines tell us that these are Jews speaking, who have learned the Law and have undergone religious training. These have been seduced by the allure of Greco-Roman culture. For them, the traditions of the ancestors have become alien.

Verse 17 The sentiments here are meant very sarcastically. Of course, they hint also at the teaching of the book, that there is life after death.

Verse 18 This sounds like something from one of the psalms of trust (e.g. 25 and 31 above). Again, the tone is derisory.

Verse 19 The clinical detachment is chilling, with the pseudo objectivity of an experiment. Notice the pairings: insult and torture v. gentleness and forbearance.

Verse 20 The ultimate test, which in a way also tests God himself, such is the hubris of truly evil people.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The desire to oppose the good and even good people is a very unattractive instinct and yet is probably latent in all of us, if we were honest. The “pull” against virtue is just part of who we are.

2. In different ways, we have all been tested, from within and from without. Did our trust grow, as children of God?

PRAYER

God of all who trust in you: show yourself a father and a mother to us, when we are in need. Help us to recognise that times of trial are also times of grace, when we can draw even closer to you through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Wisdom 2:12, 17-20; Psalm 54 [53]; James 3:16-4:3; Mark 9:30-37

READINGS 1 AND 3

The link between the Gospel and the first reading is probably the words, *let us condemn him to a shameful death*.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Ps 54 (53) makes for a good response to the reading: *For proud men have risen against me, ruthless men seek my life. They have no regard for God.*

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

Wisdom 2:12, 17-20

In this reading, the opponents of the people of faith mock the convictions of the faithful. It illustrates something in our experience of human nature: sometimes good people simply upset bad people. Usually, though, such people are not as frank and open as here.

Second Reading

James 3:16-4:3

Being honest with yourself and about yourself is an important step towards personal freedom and happiness with others. The *Letter of James* is always direct and, in the end, really helpful.

Gospel

Mark 9:30-37

As we know, ambition in itself is not a bad thing...but there is another kind of ambition which can lead us, even as disciples, astray. There may be some consolation in recalling that it all started fairly early on!?!)

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 20 September

Saints Andrew Kim Taegon, Priest, and Paul Chong Hasang, and their Companions, Martyrs

Ezra 1:1-6

Ezra (and Nehemiah) worked at the time of the return from the Exile in Babylon. The book opens with the permission to return, granted by the Persian king, Cyrus the Great.

Luke 8:16-18

The first part of this reading is plain,

especially if you consider that a lamp, in those days, meant a naked flame! The second part of more difficult, but certainly a warning again any hint of complacency or sitting on our “laurels”!

Tuesday 21 September

St Matthew, apostle and evangelist

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13

The readings are special for the feast. The first one from Ephesians reminds us of the variety of gifts needed in the community of faith, including the gift of teaching and writing.

Matthew 9:9-13

It is historically unlikely that the Matthew of this story was the author of the Gospel. Nevertheless, the story does go to the heart of the proclamation of Jesus, a proclamation of compassion, just as challenging today as in Jesus' day.

Wednesday 22 September

Ezra 9:5-9

The context for the prayer in this reading helps. After the return from Exile, there was a risk of intermarriage and Ezra was very much against that, thinking it would bring another national disaster. Hence he does penance and offers prayer.

Luke 9:1-6

The Twelve are empowered to do *exactly what Jesus did*. Just like him, they are to depend on the providence of God and the kindness of strangers. Shaking off the dust is a prophetic gesture of judgement and rejection (cf. Luke 10:11; Acts 13:51; 18:6).

Thursday 23 September

St Padre Pio, priest and religious

Haggai 1:1-8

The prophet Haggai was active just after the return from the great Exile. The reading gives a very exact date, the year 520. Haggai preaches the rebuilding of the Temple, because the prosperity of the nation depends on it.

Luke 9:7-9

The Herod here is not Herod the Great, as he was long since dead. Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, ruled

from 4 BC to AD 39, sharing the rule of his father's realm with his two brothers. He makes a unique appearance in Luke's Gospel (only) at the trial of Jesus. Today's story catches nicely the callousness of the powerful, combined with the inevitable effect of Jesus, even on such unlikely people.

Friday 24 September

Haggai 1:15-2:9

Our reading is a kind of divine proclamation for the rebuilding of the Temple. Reconstruction after catastrophe—the task of the Israelites—is also our task today.

Luke 9:18-22

We associate this story with Caesarea Philippi, but Luke gives not geographical context. Rather, the context is that of the prayer of Jesus, consistent with Luke's portrait of Jesus as a man of prayer. It is interesting that he spares the blushes of Peter by omitting Peter's rejection of Jesus' destiny.

Saturday 25 September

St Finbar, bishop

Zechariah 2:5-9, 14-15

Zechariah wrote at roughly the same time as Haggai and faced the same problem of reconstruction. Using engineering language, the prophet assures the inhabitants that God will be the “measure” of the city.

Luke 9:43-45

The vain temptation to complacent admiration never really goes away. It is likely that whenever the church enjoys uncritical admiration that it is not at its most gospel.

