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

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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).

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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.

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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)

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

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

When we had finished the journey 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; 23:12-13; Lk 9:48; 22:26.

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**Sequence 1**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passion Prediction</th>
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**Sequence 2**

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**Sequence 3**

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**Sequence 4**

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<th>Service of the community</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
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**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.

**POINTER 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 welcome 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.
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? Let him show by his good life that his works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast 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.

James 4:4 Adulterers! Do you not know that 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”?

James 4:5 But he gives all grace; therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

James 4:6 Draw near to God, resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. 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 élite 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 (akatasatos) 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 akuton, 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 akuton (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 our own. 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 dented 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.

Let us lie in wait for the righteous man

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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

B’. Speech of the impious (5:1-23)
A’. 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 beauty 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 ininfirmities 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, is such as 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.
**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 23 September**

St Padre Pio

Proverbs 3:27-34

How should we behave towards our neighbours? This reading offers a range of advice and perhaps one teaching or other will resonate with my own experience.

Luke 8:16-18

Our Gospel offers some arresting, even disconcerting, sayings of Jesus.

**Tuesday 24 September**

Proverbs 21:1-6,10-13

Today, we hear a series of proverbs offering wisdom coming from reflection upon experience. Any one proverb would merit reflection and perhaps there is one that speaks to you today.

Luke 8:19-21

It is interesting that Luke, who has the fullest portrait of Mary, should include this intriguing passage.

**Wednesday 25 September**

St Finbars, bishop

Proverbs 30:5-9

The prayer included in this reading is a surprise, but the reasons given are good. It comes down to moderation or, as a friend puts it, an “elegant sufficiency”!!

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 judgment and rejection (cf. Luke 10:11; Acts 13:51; 18:6).

**Thursday 26 September**

Sts Cosmas and Damian, martyrs

Proverbs 3:1-11

This reading is sometimes chosen for funerals and you can see why. The wisdom within is somewhat static: this is just how things are and we must accept it.


The disciples repeat the common opinion, as we heard yesterday. But Jesus challenges them (and us) directly to go deeper.

**Friday 27 September**

St Vincent de Paul, priest and religious

Proverbs 11:9-12:8

Our final reading from Ecclesiastes is a poem...but about what? If you listen carefully, you will see it is about the dilapidation of old age. For instance, the strong men are our legs and the women who grind are our teeth. And so on. The end of life is captured marvellously “before the silver cord has snapped, or the golden lamp been broken, or the pitcher shattered at the spring, or the pulley cracked at the well.”

Even though Ecclesiastes can be emotionally reserved, there is a pathos for the human condition in this poem.

Luke 9:43-45

Suffering is always bewildering, so the reaction of the disciples in this passage is perfectly understandable.

**Saturday 28 September**

St Laurence Ruiz and companions, martyrs; St Wenceslaus, martyr

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

For the next three days, we hear from the book of Ecclesiastes. When read as a whole, it is a surprise to find this book in our Bible, because it is so pessimistic. Our reading today captures that in a reflection upon vanity of vanities. Remember, however, that vanity here does not mean self-regard (cf. selfies!) but rather futility / emptiness. The opening words could be well translated as “futility of futilities” or “the most futile.”