God does not expect us to imitate Jesus Christ; He expects us to allow the life of Jesus to be manifested in our lives, in the way we live in the world with others, how we view them – Owen Chambers

September 22nd The Shofar Imitate Christ

Jesus – truly God and fully man

Have you ever noticed that whenever Jesus talks about his inevitable death in Mark, he uses an indirectness. He speaks in the third person. He talks about what will happen to the "Son of Man," who Jesus refers to as "he," not "I." Terrible things will happen *to the Son of Man*.

Why does Jesus refer to his impending suffering in this way? I wonder if the reason is that Jesus himself is uncomfortable talking about it in so direct a way. He talks of the Son of Man needing to undergo suffering, but that is not the same as saying that he will be the victim.

In this language we come face top face with Jesus' humanity. He is like us in every way, including the fear of suffering and death. On the one hand Jesus understands that he is the One the Father has called to give himself for the life of the world. On the other, he struggles with that call. We see this clearly in the Garden of Gethsemane when events are quickly moving toward the cross. He still prays that he will not have the drink this bitter cup. Who of us would not pray that way?

Today's reading puts a focus on the true and full humanity of Jesus'. It is as a human just like us that he chooses obedience to the Father's will. As Hebrews makes clear, Jesus's obedience to the Father does not come naturally. *He learned obedience through what he suffered* (Hebrews 5: 8).

"Handing over" is what God calls for

Jesus uses an especially important Greek word in this passage, and in his third prediction in Mark 10:32-34: *paradidomai.* Some bibles translate this word as "betrayed," but in the later passages it prefers "handed over." Of course, "handed over" and "betrayed" both have the sense of helplessness and passivity, but, in the light of the reference to children a little later may make the idea of "being handed" over more appropriate.

One of the most amazing things about the gospels, especially Mark, is that they do not hesitate to present the disciples as nincompoops. These men will later on be apostles, men sent out by Jesus to proclaim the gospel. They held places of honour and respect, and several of them died as martyrs. If the gospels were written to impress, the disciples would certainly have been presented in a different light. But they were more than a little thick and Mark does not disguise it. Mark says that they did not understand what Jesus was saying, but they could not bring themselves to ask him any questions about it. They all wanted to look like good students to Jesus. Asking him some basic questions about what he was teaching them would betray their stupidity. They had their pride, afterall.

But that is not the end of it. Far from it. As they are walking along, ignorant as they are of what Jesus really means, they begin to argue about who is the greatest. Which one is really Jesus's most important disciple? Which one stands out as the most worthy and devoted disciple? What it would have been to be a fly on the wall for those discussion.

Things are different in the Kingdom

Jesus' response is to sit them down for a time of teaching, offering them a teaching firstly with a *pronouncement* and then a *demonstration*. The pronouncement takes the form of a succinct saying, *Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all*. That is certainly not the way things work in the real world. People do not get ahead by making sure they are last in line. People do not rise to the top of the heap by making sure they have served everyone else first. But Jesus is not talking about human forms of wisdom, the way of the world around us. He is talking about the upside-down ways of the Kingdom of God.

From a human point of view this teaching seems to be incredibly impractical, airy-fairy thinking and for some, even offensive. It represents for sure a prescription for being left behind, being taken advantage of and treated as a doormat. Surely that is not what God wants.

Who is the one saying this audacious thing? He himself was no push-over. He did not always come across as a "nice man". He had no fear of standing up to the Jewish leaders, and often resorted to cutting remarks and fierce judgements. He called the scribes and Pharisees "whited sepulchres" and "hypocrites". He emptied the temple on a rampage. He was not always the gentle Jesus meek and mild.

Being a servant before presuming to judge

When Jesus speaks of disciples taking the last place and being a servant of all he is not talking about us being timid and frightened. It has more to do with strength than weakness. The attitude of servanthood is the mark of a person who knows who he or she is and is empowered by that. Christian servants know their true worth. They do not need the false praise and baubles of the wider world. Servant discipleship

comes from the heart of a person who knows he or she is loved and valued, who is deeply aware of their identity. Nothing can take that away. The more we become identified with Jesus Christ and sure of God's love, the more we will be able to drop the pretence of greatness and assume the role of servanthood. We do not have to prove anything. We have all we need in God, the God in whose image and likeness we have been created.

Love, Christian Love is what the world needs

Servant leaders exercise their leadership by putting others ahead of themselves. They put aside their natural instincts to judge, to feel the need to bring down the judgment from above into the lives of those they think are "sinners". True Christian authority is exercised through their love for others. It is being "as Christ would be" in our dealings with others. Others follow Christian disciple/servant leaders because they know that in doing so, they will not be abused or abandoned, because they know their welfare, success, and wellbeing are the focus of the Christian servant.

Genuine Christian servant-leaders are energised by this desire to serve others, to bring Christ alive in the lives of others, to show concern and love for others before concerning themselves with their own needs. Servant leadership is about ensuring that other people's highest priority needs are being served. This is what we should be asking about the way we live among others: Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? Do we leave others with an awareness of being embraced fully, loved, healed, restored and precious in our own eyes and in the eyes of our Lord? We must consider the impact our engagements have on the least privileged in society. Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived? What are the effects of our exercise of discipleship on other?

Herein is the foundation of the life of all servant disciples. They live in the way they do because Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life." Putting others first is doing what Jesus did, living the way he lived. It is about viewing the world through the eyes of Jesus.

Jesus is the model – imitate Him!

But Jesus does not just teach it, he also acts it out in a dramatic parable. He takes a little child who happened to be hanging around the house, picks the child up, and embraces him or her in his arms. From our vantage point, this seems to be cute, but it was not likely cute to Jesus's disciples. In his day, children were "seen but not heard." Children were not worth much until they grew up and proved themselves. They had to have something to offer the community and as children they were far from doing that. They were thought of as being nobodies. Their worth was tied up in their potential as adults, not in their being children.

But what Jesus does here is place a child in the centre of the disciples' attention and stuns the disciples by declaring *Whoever welcome one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.* What does Jesus mean by "welcoming one such child in my name"? "In my name" means: because of me or having learned it from me. It means imitating me in the way I live and act towards others. Let us go back to that Greek word highlighted earlier: *paradidomai, handed over*. This is one of the key characteristics of children, they are not so much actors as those who are acted upon. They do not hold the place of power but are acted upon by the powerful.

It is tough serving others – especially sinners

This is how Mark ties the first part of this reading with the last. First, in his oblique way, Jesus said that he *will be handed over* to the authorities and will be acted upon. He will be powerless before the combined authority of the Jewish religious authorities and the all-powerful Roman state in the person of Pontius Pilate. Now he hugs a child and tells the disciples and us, whoever welcome the powerless welcomes me and the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes the sinners, the marginalised, the oddballs; whoever embraces the truly unlovable, the powerless hypocrites and the underserving welcome God because God has chosen this way to show his redeeming love to the world. What we do or fail to do to others we do or we fail to do to God. That is as clear and as simple as Jesus himself makes it for us. **Note**: no exceptions. There is no escape clause here, just as Jesus did not seek wriggle room to leave out those who did not show respect to him first. Remember his final words on the cross: *Father forgive them.* That is the witness given to us to follow.

The way of discipleship is not about seeking personal greatness, it is about servanthood. There is no room for pride, for self-righteousness. The way of discipleship is not about seeking power over others but accepting servanthood and giving up "winning" all engagements that others may prosper. The way of discipleship is the willingness to be acted upon rather than being the actor. It is the way of love. It is the way of the cross.

This is the teaching, and the witness Mark picked up from Jesus' great kingdom teaching, the Sermon on the Mount– turning the other cheek, praying for enemies, forgiving the sins of others and going the extra mile.

We are to have a deep relationship with Christ – a living relationship marked clearly by our obedience, submission and love for the Lord. Without love, all our actions – no matter how impressive or persuasive – will amount to nothing; they would simply be mimicry. The motivations behind our actions will determine whether we are truly imitating or simply mimicking Jesus. Mimicry arises when there is no living relationship with him and it is fruitless. It is all so easy to just "go through the motions" of being a