

Readings

Proverbs 31: 10-31

Mark 9: 30-37

Sermon

My God is so big, so strong and so mighty,
There's nothing my God cannot do.

Most of us will have sung that song and I suspect there are a fair number of people who expect their God to be 'so strong and so mighty so that they don't have to worry about anything because their god will sort everything out for them. Furthermore, their god will understand their unique perspective on life and not only put them in charge but help them get rid of the people they dislike.

Following that though I read a book some time ago called *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism*.¹

The title is very relevant with the United States pulling out of Afghanistan. and leaving that country much the same as when they first invaded. But what made a lasting impression on me was the way the book explained the theology and philosophy of the imaginary superhero.

I never read Captain America comics but apparently that character came into existence through the frustration some Americans felt at their government's reluctance to enter the Second World War. Superheroes don't do democracy, bureaucracy, or due process, they just get the job done.

Superman takes the bad guys straight to gaol without passing go or collecting \$200.

Despite the hand wringing and fretting of our parents my generation didn't suffer too much from the piles of comics under our beds. In fact, I passed School Certificate English by reading the Classics Comics rather than wading through the set book.

But the real danger is that people take the imaginary world of superheroes into the voting booth and elect people who lead through aggression and bullying. They vote that way because they believe that, like the mythical superheroes, those are the people who get things done and will make their nation great again.

In a world where the rich get richer and the poor get even more destitute people want a god who is so big, so strong and so mighty, and if they don't believe in god then they deify a politician, king, queen or dictator.

In contrast to these imagined saviours the image Jesus gives of God, in this morning's reading is not of a god who is so big, so strong and so mighty but a vulnerable God. Right from the turning point on the road to Caesarea Philippi, and the climax of the crucifixion, Mark's Gospel focuses on the vulnerability of the God we image in Jesus.

¹ Robert Jewett & John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Eerdmans 2003)

Of course, the disciples do not understand and people in our world also struggle to understand. Once again Jesus talks about his execution and, following Jesus' rebuke of Peter, the disciples are afraid to engage in the conversation or ask any questions. Instead, they argue among themselves about who is the greatest.

Perhaps Jesus' talk of his death prompted a discussion about succession, but they were dismissive of Jesus' talk of his death and still fixated on the idea of an all-conquering mighty messiah that would become king when they get to Jerusalem. Therefore, they were arguing about the cabinet posts they would get as his supporters. In fact, further along in the narrative James and John come to Jesus and ask 'grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory. (Mark 10:37)

That is a fair indication that they still see Jesus at least as a king and probably a god who is so big, so strong and so mighty. It would therefore seem fair that, as supporters, they will get some of the power and the glory. Jesus certainly didn't seem the sort of leader who would turn on his loyal supporters and say, 'Your Fired!'

However, the confusion is not just limited to the disciples. In her commentary on Mark's Gospel Morna Hooker suggests that although we will never know for sure there probably was wrangling in the gospel writer's community. Even if there wasn't Mark would have guessed that it would be inevitable that such disputes would arise in any community of Jesus' followers.²

That is certainly borne out by church history and although Constantine usually gets the blame for encouraging the institutionalising the church it's bishops quickly adapted to the privileged lifestyle. Furthermore, the fact that Constantine had bishops to deal with indicated that the church already had a hierarchy.

To be fair it is really difficult for any organisation to exist without some form of structured leadership. Perhaps Jesus recognised that when he gave the instruction 'whoever wants to be first must be last of all and a servant of all.' (Mark 9:35)

Ironically the way such leadership can work is demonstrated in our Proverbs reading where the strong-willed 'feminine wisdom spirit' at the beginning of the book seems to have been domesticated into the dutiful wife in a patriarchal society by the end of the book. However, if we pay close attention, we find that the male who sits at the gate is not praised for his own achievements but because of the achievements of his wife. It is the dutiful wife who engages in property development and expands the family business while she keeps the household running. The dutiful wife is equally as wise as the wisdom Spirit who speaks at the city gates. She is wise enough to be a leader of all, by being a servant of all.

Leadership in Jesus' community, and the community of those who would continue to take Jesus' ideals into the future, must be leadership that first and foremost wants to serve. To serve both the gospel and those that the leader is called to lead. It must be leadership that, in the name of the God who is vulnerable enough to be crucified, welcomes the most vulnerable into the community of Christ. To illustrate that point Jesus took a child in his

² Morna Hooker *The Gospel according to St Mark* (London: A&C Black, 1991), pp.225-228.

arms and said, 'whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me'. (Mark 9:37).

This is not about indoctrinating children to become future church members although I suspect that many people in Western Society who would consider themselves to be atheists or agnostics owe their kindness and care for the least in our society to their early childhood Christian Education. I am not bold enough to suggest why they subsequently left the church but its disempowering structures and insistence on believing the unbelievable must play a part. I went to an afterschool programme as a child and was shown slides of Pilgrims Progress which gave me nightmares for weeks. Furthermore, I recently met a very caring person who as a child was frightened out of the church by stories of the rapture.

The Jesus of Mark's Gospel was simply using the child as an example of the most vulnerable of people. In fact, many communities don't regard children as people.

I can still remember being together with my aunt and my cousins when the conversation moved to the approach of our 40th birthdays. My aunt's surprised reaction was to exclaim 'O gosh, you are all almost people! My aunt certainly valued children and it was the realisation of just how old we were becoming that prompted the remark. I can remember being just as shocked to hear our Geoff and his friend Kim Calvert discussing how they intended to celebrate their 40th birthdays. They are now both, in their fifties which just make me feel old.

I remember one of my least favourite politicians once suggesting that that 'people should only have children when they can afford it.' Raewyn and I came close to being able to afford children when we were in our fifties and by then our boys were schoolteachers making a solid contribution to the future society and growing with them as been a real joy.

History is full of stories of children who had a less than ideal start. One of my favourite stories belongs to Sir Ray Avery who spent his childhood running away from foster homes after his drunken father left and his mother knocked him unconscious with a piece of firewood. Sir Ray Avery's story demonstrates that the great blessing of children, and of the world's most vulnerable is that they have the potential to do amazing things that transform people's lives.

However, Jesus' plea for the vulnerable, by using a child as an example, did much more than alert us to the potential of vulnerable people.

Furthermore, the last verse of our reading states that 'whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me'. (Mark 9:37). That is one of the gospel statements that underpins Trinitarian theology and links Jesus and God together. More importantly it links Jesus' vulnerability with divine vulnerability. The verse also makes the theological statement that we welcome Christ when we welcome the most vulnerable.

That concept is more fully developed In Matthew's Gospel as the parable of the sheep and the goats. That episode also highlights the reality that we cut ourselves off from Christ when we fail to welcome the vulnerable. For I was hungry, and you gave me no food and so on until Jesus says 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' (Matthew 25:45)

In today's passage Jesus calls us to a sense of solidarity with lowliness and vulnerability and affirms that in acts of caring and love we come face to face with the divine. Jesus is speaking of a community which provides mutual caring and support and his own actions demonstrate such a possibility. His self-giving is both the symbol of divine presence and the model of being in communion with him and in community with others both within the church and throughout all humanity.³

At present New Zealand's lockdown policies are being sniped at by those who think there is more economic benefit in allowing some people to get sick and even die.

Writing in The Telegraph, Matthew Lesh, the head of research at the Adam Smith Institute, was critical of New Zealand's policy of eliminating, rather than slowing the spread of the virus and even referred to New Zealand as an isolated dystopia'.⁴

However, I have read several dystopian novels and watched the Mad Max films on Television when my boys were growing up and Aotearoa's death toll from Covid 19 does not remind me of any of them.

Of course, by now, apart from the vehicles that wouldn't get a warrant of fitness without removing their harpoons what I remember most from the Mad Max movies was Tina Turner singing 'We Don't Need Another Hero'.

That is what I believe Jesus was trying to impress on his disciples and what Mark was trying to impress on his readers.

What has kept the death toll from Covid in Aotearoa so amazing low is not so much the woman who 'opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue'. (Proverbs 31:26)

The real hero of our pandemic struggle has been the mythical team of five million who, with childlike naivety, have put people's wellbeing ahead of the working of market economy and the agenda of the rich and powerful.

Mark and the Jesus he is writing about calls us as the disciples of Christ to a servant leadership that naively puts our care for others ahead of our own safety and status. It is with such leadership that the divine realm is lived out in our time and place.

It is absolutely true that there's nothing our God cannot do but our God, the God we image in the vulnerable Christ, who walks beside us in our darkest moments, operates in our world through people of faith who lead by serving others.

³ <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MkPentecost17.html>

⁴ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/126150152/an-isolated-dystopia-columnist-condemns-jacinda-arderns-zero-covid19-policy-approach>