

Our Mandate: Serve, Welcome, Safeguard

Tom Yacomeni

Mark 9:33-42

Great, well today's the last instalment of our No Nonsense sermon series, and the last two months have flown by, haven't they? We've looked at Jesus' message, we've looked at his power, we've looked at his authority and then we saw what he started to teach his followers about discipleship. And we remember how, at first, Jesus invited his followers to "come and see" (John 1:39). He was on the shore, and he called them to him. They said "where are you staying?" (John 1:37), and he said "come and see." But then, bit by bit, the challenge level that he put before them was raised. Last week, Andrew Kitcatt shared how Jesus told the disciples that they would need to take up their cross if they were to follow him. In other words, discipleship cannot just be something we merely observe, or something that we do like a spectator sport.

We can't just watch from the sidelines. It is a call to leave comfort behind. It's a call that moves from "come and see" to "come and die" - come and die to ourselves, to die to sin, to die to worldly ambitions. But the promise of Jesus is that all the while we're doing that, while we're coming to 'die', we are living in communion with Christ, and that the presence of God is with us. He gave us the Holy Spirit so that we are never left alone as orphans. Now Rick Warren calls this "The Jesus method of ministry": This progression from come and see, to come and die. All of us will be on that continuum somewhere along the way. That is the path of discipleship we're on.

And yet, actually, we find that that pathway to 'come and die' is the path to abundant life! Do you know in a few weeks it will be Palm Sunday? we will return to Mark's gospel for the readings in Holy Week and leading up to Easter. There we see, graphically, how Jesus died for us on the cross, but on the third day he overcame sin and death so that we can rise with him. We can be forgiven, we can overcome in the same way that he did, to a new kind of life. If we believe in the truth of that claim and take on the implications of Christ's death and resurrection into our own lives, that is the key that opens the doorway to grace and forgiveness, for us to live the life that he's called us to live. Enabling us to live a life of love, and blessing others, because he first loved us,^(1 John 4:19) and blessed us.

Now that all sounds great, and I think many of us will go 'Yes! Amen! That's the gospel good news!' But the trouble is that we are fallible human beings. Even if we, like the apostle Peter, have taken that great step of faith and we've declared our belief in Jesus and we've been forgiven of all our sins, we can easily actually still be overtaken by worldly wants by pride and selfishness. That is the trouble with you and me, because, in the same way, one minute Peter was called 'blessed'^(Mt. 16:17) because he'd called out to Jesus that "'you are the Christ, the son of the living God'" ^(Mt. 16:16). He'd made that amazing declaration, and Jesus said 'Yes! Hooray, you're blessed!' And then the next minute it's 'get behind me Satan, you have in mind the things of men (the things of the world).'^(Mt. 16:23) He got that stinging rebuke. But we're same, aren't we? We want to push forward in discipleship, and then the next moment we might have pride, or worldly ambition, leeching into our thinking.

And just these few verses later at the start of today's passage Jesus catches all the disciples out, not just Peter. He asked, 'what were you chatting about on the road?' and they all went 'Uh...um...'. Awkward silence. It's pure comedy. Of course, they were arguing about who was the greatest.^(Mk. 9:33) And they'd been on the road back to Capernaum. Interestingly, Capernaum means "place of comfort."¹ They were going back to their comfort zone. But once they got home, Jesus took that opportunity to close the door and do some serious, tough, teaching about his expectations for what truly godly ministry should look like in practice.

¹ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2584/niv/tr/0-1/>

And the principles that he shared are really important for us here today at All Saints, because Jesus calls out some of the vital markers of what makes a great church. And it isn't always the things that we think of first. The disciples were arguing about 'who was the greatest.'^(Mk. 9:34) and the word in the Greek is 'mega' (meizōn, μείζων).² So, they're asking, 'who's the most 'mega' disciple?' And, today, we've got to worry if we start thinking that way - 'Am I a great disciple or not?' It does make me wonder if larger churches should start to worry if they become known as a 'mega church.' Because as the old phrase puts it: 'New levels, new devils.' The bigger you grow, the more challenges and temptations and exposure comes to the church and its leadership. As we grow, we've got to be ever more careful.

Now don't get me wrong growth is good. Spiritually healthy and vital churches do grow as a natural part of what happens. Living things, living healthy things grow. But Jesus is quite clear in his teaching that for a Christian community, the marks of success are in many ways contradictory to what the world expects. That look of greatness on the outside may not be what Jesus really wants. So in these few verses that follow, I see Jesus pointing out at least seven marks of a great Christian community.

The first, of course, is humility and an attitude of service.

Mark 9:35 | ³⁵"Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, 'Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.'"

It's worth just pausing for a moment to realise just how radical and subversive this teaching would have been to first century listeners. Jewish and Roman culture at the time was built on an honour-shame hierarchy, with elite rulers at the top and servant slaves down the bottom. And so, to choose to downgrade was totally contrary to their way of thinking. It would actually be about renouncing honour that had been earned or imparted. And that would have been a shame: 'such a shame for somebody to become a servant.' And Roman society prized 'virtus', which was strength and dominance and honour. Elite men displayed status through patronage and authority.

² <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g3187/niv/tr/0-1/>

So, servanthood was a state of powerlessness. So, I wonder if we rephrase that to suit those times. Jesus said 'if you want first place, then step forward to serve without looking for honour, for power or even recognition.' And that's actually a tough call for each one of us, isn't it? We all want to be recognised, even if it's just a little bit. We just want a little bit of recognition for what we do. But Jesus talked about serving instead. If you scan the best-selling contemporary leadership/business philosophies books (especially ones that sold last year), not many of them recommend total humility as the route to greatness. Instead I was looking at 'You know you can harness AI to build your winning team'; or 'You can learn strengths-based leadership'; Or even 'You can study the strategic genius of Taylor Swift' (that was one of the biggest selling ones last year). But the first mark of great Christian community is an attitude of humility, recognising that we are here to serve, not to be served. And actually, we might remain invisible in doing that behind the scenes.

Mark 9:36-37 | ³⁶ He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ 'Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.'

Now, in Mark 9:36, Jesus placed a child amongst them. We've got children amongst us today which is a wonderful privilege. But children present their own needs. They have their own desires, and so by placing the children among them, Jesus was teaching his disciples what was really important. And then he took the child in his arms and said 'Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me. Whoever welcomes me doesn't welcome me, but the one who sent me.' So, I think it's really important to recognise Jesus was talking about children there. Yes, he was talking about vulnerable people, about powerless people, but he was also very visibly saying children's work is really important. **And so I think the second and third marks of a great church is great youth and children's work, and a warm welcome for everyone especially those who are vulnerable and those who are powerless.** And nothing cheers my heart more to hear that people feel welcome and safe here at All Saints, and I trust that every child that comes here feels welcome and honoured. And so Jo and Theo, and their amazing teams, do a fabulous job caring for them and sharing the love of God in fun and ways. And I think they we need to double-honour them now.

The next marks of a great church are still really contentious today.

Mark 9:38-41 | ³⁸ 'Teacher,' said John, 'we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.' ³⁹ 'Do not stop him,' Jesus said. 'For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, ⁴⁰ for whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.

Great churches honour other ministries. Wherever people call upon the name of Jesus and do the works of the Kingdom, we are on the same team and we need to honour them. Now of course, word of caution, we have to be discerning about whether other ministries are fruitful in a good way. Because Jesus said 'by their fruit you should judge them.'^(Mt. 7:16) So they have to be operating in humility and service, and placing Jesus front and centre in all they do. But the Lord can work through those that whole smorgasbord of styles and denominations and approaches. If Jesus is central, we honour that. We say 'Thank you, Lord! That is amazing.' I imagine it's a bit like how hot you like your curry. Are you a korma, or a vindaloo? We have our different preferences, there are different churches that cater to different styles. So great churches promote church unity.

Great churches also encourage those who practice Holy Spirit ministry. Jesus was pointing out some of the things that good churches do as well. Driving out demons in the name of the Lord Jesus and doing miracles in his name. Now Keith Powell was here on Wednesday to help us to learn to pray for others more effectively. And so if we are willing to pray we'll see answers to prayer. It just takes us being willing to pray and to bless those who are willing to pray. That could be loudly or it could be silently. It could be in many different ways. It could be using set prayers. It could be praying for them or being led by the Spirit to particularly focus on something. But I long for more of that to happen, because as we all learn to pray, more wonderful answers to prayer will happen. Miracles will happen in this place, if we are willing to pray. Keep praying! And so, we honour that, and that's the sign of a great church: Holy Spirit ministry being encouraged.

Marker number six. It's interesting, because at first glance, it looks like Jesus simply highlights the need for acts of kindness in the church, such as giving a cup of water or a good cup of coffee on the way in. These are things that we'd highlight, and practical pastoral care in that way. But actually, when you study the text, it's flipped around. Jesus is saying that anybody who blesses us or blesses you with a cup of water, they are rewarded and blessed. Isn't that interesting? It's a bit flipped around from what we might expect. And so, to me, this is about **a culture of blessing**. Not only being thankful and humbly receiving whatever is set before us, but in turn blessing those who are kind towards us, as well and recognising that folks in the community can serve the church. And we're so grateful for that! You see, in Luke 10:5-7, when Jesus sent out the disciples, he told them to look for 'people of peace,' and then stay at their house and eat whatever is set before them. Great, fantastic. And so, it just shows us that a great church community is interdependent. We are dependent on our community in the same way. We want to give thanks for those around us who are generous towards us. We don't isolate ourselves from the community, but we are thankful for everybody in the community. Such that as we learn together, as we flourish together, the whole community is blessed. And that's what I call a culture of blessing.

What we're seeking to do in our year of blessing is not only just to be generous ourselves but actually to say 'Thank you!' to those who are organising things in our community, and, actually, serve us so well. Whenever you go into *Tesco*: 'Thank you so much for providing my milk!' When I go to the pub for a beautiful pint of beer: 'Thank you for putting flowers and plants around our village that makes it look good.' Thank you to those who empty the bins. They're just amazing servants who bless us. And the culture of blessing says 'thank you' to them. They are vital for God's kingdom. They're vital in God's kingdom economy.

And so that's what we were doing on Thursday when we had our year of blessing supper. It's not only to say 'thank you' to our volunteers within the

church, but also the wider community of volunteers. Those who don't often come to church. We wanted to bless them and thank them as well. And that felt excellent to be able to do. So, I'm so grateful for their kindness. And later in the year we want to bless and thank other teams and other organisations in the community who serve us. We just want to say 'thank you!' We recognise that, just as Jesus was saying in this text. We give thanks for our schools that teach our children. We give thanks for the businesses and organizations that serve us day in and day out.

Mark 9:42 | “⁴² ‘If anyone causes one of these little ones – those who believe in me – to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung round their neck and they were thrown into the sea...’”

The final mark of a great church. And Jesus highlights this in the last verse that we looked at. And sadly, it's quite topical. Remember Jesus has still probably got a child in his arms as he's saying this: 'it'd be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.' Boom...that's tough teaching. This is Jesus teaching to his church behind closed doors. And actually, literally, Jesus said, if anyone causes one of these little ones to be 'scandalized'³ (*skandalizō*), that's the Greek: 'If anyone causes any of these little ones to be scandalized, it would be better for them to be thrown in the sea.' And scandals hit the church all the time. Traumatized victims share how they've been hurt or overlooked or exploited or damaged. And actually, Jesus was pretty harsh with that. He really did say those words. But anyone who is scandalized or caused to stumble. This week, another bishop was arrested. The king's brother was also arrested. And so that's why **the final mark of a great church has to be robust safeguarding**. It really does. I think it's Jesus' teaching right here. Robust safeguarding is essential for a great church. And I'm so grateful to everyone in this church who works so hard to keep this church safe. Our amazing safeguarding officers, Peter and Alison Tucker. But they don't keep us safe - **we all keep us safe. It's all of our role to do that**. Everybody who serves and trains everyone. And there are those who cheerfully do their safeguarding training. It's better than a millstone being hung around your neck, it really is.

³ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g4624/niv/tr/0-1/>

Thank you to all those who work with children and vulnerable adults. I think we also need to honour all those who are working with children and vulnerable adults on a daily basis. All the teachers, the folks at the hospital and in the social services around us. I'm amazed! Karen Kopp and Kat Lauder and Gemma Day all have positions of great responsibility working with children and parents in this county. We need to pray for them. I asked Karen (she heads up the children in care team for the whole county) for just some prayer pointers, and she said there are three main areas for prayer.

- 1) Pray that the children will be surrounded by the right people to help them feel loved and support, to heal from all the trauma they have experienced.
- 2) That the staff in Karen's team will have enough energy and compassion to support the children.
- 3) That there will be enough foster placements locally to meet the needs of the children who need a safe and stable and loving home (because currently they don't have enough foster families in BANES and so that means children have to be sent out of county to be looked after).

And then Kat is working legally with families to help them as well. And then Gemma is in charge of the maternity unit at the hospital. Those first moments of life for children and parents: incredible responsibilities. We need to pray for them and honour them.

And Jesus suggests that anything that could cause little ones to stumble requires drastic action. In later verses he says this: "If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off." Goodness me. Everybody doesn't like that. These are harsh words of Jesus. Now, he was using hyperbole there. But, actually, I think he was also demonstrating that it should be drastic. Drastic measures where we see these things. **We don't just sweep stuff under the carpet.** You know, if you actually cut your arm off, you would see it. It would be a seen thing. We must take abuse seriously. If you see it in this church, let us know ASAP!

So, closed doors teaching from Jesus about what makes a great church great church. 7 marks:

1) An attitude of humility and service.

2) Great youth and children's work.

3) A warm welcome.

4) Church unity is honoured - other churches and ministries are honoured.

5) Holy Spirit ministry - we want to see people encountering Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.

6) A culture of blessing - thank you to everybody that serves us in this community we want to bless you back that's the culture of blessing and

7) Safeguarding – robust, taken seriously.



@allsaintswestonchurch



All Saints Weston Church



01225 447663

All Saints Church, Church Street, Weston, Bath, BA1 4BT
office@allsaintswestn.org.uk allsaintsweston.org.uk