Mark 9: 30-37

In 1543 Ignatius wrote: “There are few people who realize what God would make of them if they abandoned themselves entirely into his hands and let themselves be formed by his grace”[[1]](#footnote-1) I start with these words because Jesus’ words and actions in today’s gospel call us to examine our personal process. If we want to learn and grow spiritually, we have to engage with the Spirt.

Rowan Williams says Mark’s gospel text. “It is a book about how the continuing reality of Jesus in his community- takes you constantly in and out of silence, in and out of language. For a moment you may see you grasp, you then have to let go and begin again. You think you that you might have mastered it; and suddenly find you haven’t you must be quiet and listen. This gospel is about the fundamental aspect of faith which is the trustful letting go into a love that is completely surprizing and works completely by its own rules, not yours.[[2]](#footnote-2) On the issue of the alternative endings to Mark’s gospel Williams says “the work of Jesus in the reader is the end of the gospel” [[3]](#footnote-3) Wow! What an incredible statement about the journey of faith, and the reality of lived experience. How timely it is to be reminded of our frailties when it comes to understanding. There is no straight trajectory.

Today’s gospel opens with the disciples arguing with each other about who is greatest. Even while watching Jesus and listening to his message and being touched by his charisma, the disciples can’t get past their own egos! Can we be similarly myopic?

Jesus tells his followers the first will be last, and the last first, this is difficult teaching. Our first instinct is to hold on and to struggle for our identity. This is why I opened with Ignatius words. I speak from experience this week as I have allowed my Teaching Registration to lapse after 45years and I have decoupled myself from my home parish where I had been serving. How hard it is to forgo customary roles and truly wait on God.

In today’s Gospel Jesus shows us the way. He picks up a child and places it in their midst. It’s difficult for us to imagine just how shocking this signature move was. Today we may idealise and sentimentalise the innocence of childhood. In Jesus time children were without status or value. Brendan Bryne says that to welcome a child would be to turn prevailing values upside down putting aside ideas of self-importance and adult status to simply meet the child as an equal; as child to child. Jesus tells his followers that this is what they should do. This is the way of welcoming him and the Father who stands behind his entire life and mission. Byrne says it is hard to exaggerate the significance of this divine identification[[4]](#footnote-4).

This is not the only occasion when Jesus used children as an example of turning the world order on its head. What is it that Jesus calls us to, in what Brendan Bern terms the gaze of child to child? I think. it is the call to participatory love. This is the revolutionary quality that we are called toward together.

In today’s gospel we don’t see a punitive Trinitarian God, we see one concerned with radical equity. Jesus invites all people and asks us to find the strength for self-denial.

The theme of Richard Rohr’s meditation over this past week has been Life as Participation in the love of God[[5]](#footnote-5). This is not always a simple process. In Ignatian terms, there are times of desolation and consolation. Our role is to be alert to our process. How do we participate? It can be an awareness that we are part of something more than we are observing or believing in. It isn’t just a mental task of thinking. Last week I talked about the deep and mysterious place within where transformation takes place. A place that enables us to respond to Jesus saying: “You are the Messiah”.

Last week I also said that it may not be easy to articulate this place of deep-knowledge. We may need another medium to focus it. Perhaps dance or music, writing or painting, or some other creative vehicle. In fact, we may need unusual circumstances to take us to this place. So I return to a book I introduced you to in my first sermon here. Daniel O’Leary who says that beyond the frantically obsessing about smaller and personal issues, contemplation-time somehow orients the soul towards the bigger horizons where love seems to infuse everything. Contemplation unconsciously nourishes a deep surrender to the unfolding of life-its cancers as well as its gifts because for the Christian this is the only unfolding of God we will ever experience. Our deepest longing is to touch the love that lies at the core of our being to be intimate with the love that infuses everything[[6]](#footnote-6).

What a prospect of joy to anticipate the unfolding of love in our life. The work has to happen in us. We may struggle, we may lose our way. This is when we need each other in community to carry each other’s burdens, and also inspire and teach each other.

O’Leary’s revelation on dancing to his death, is the struggle in holding together the God’s love in all creation with his personal illness. He uses the words of Telhiard de Chardin scientist, poet, and artist to explain this love saying:

“The divine presence in the world in this mysterious milieu radiating throughout all levels of the universe, through matter, life and human experience. We are immersed in it bathed in it. It can invade our whole being and transform us if we but let it[[7]](#footnote-7).” We have to find the courage to look into creation with the eyes of wonder.

I bookend with an Ignatian prayer:

Take O Lord and receive my entire liberty, my memory, my understanding, my whole will. All that I am and all that I possess you have given me. I surrender it to you to be disposed of according to your most holy will. Give me only your love and your grace. With these I will be rich enough and will desire nothing more[[8]](#footnote-8).

AMEN

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19.09.2021

1. Ignatius Loyola The Spiritual Exercises 15th Annotation [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rowan Williams, *Meeting God In Mark* p70 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid p72 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Brendan Byrne, A Costly Freedom p152 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Richard Rohr’s Weekly Meditation September 13- [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Daniel O’ Leary *Dancing To My Death* p40 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Daniel O’Leary *An Astonishing Secret* p 113 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Multiple places in Ignatius Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)