

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 20 SEPTEMBER 2009

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

Mark 9: 30-37

“Jesus and the Dynamics of Community Life”

1. Our text this morning in Mark 9: 30-37 takes us into the deepest paradoxes of human group life and social organisation. In this text, Jesus predicts his death at the hands of the powerful who oppose his life and teaching, and where his own community battle over power, privilege, and the nature of leadership.

The text equally reminds us that the divine participates with us in the paradox of unjust suffering by producing new life, new life including the emergence of new social forms of life and leadership.

In other words, this text call on us to take the journey of “the way of the cross” that leads to new forms of life, and this is applied to every sphere of life. In this week’s reading in Mark the issue is emergent leadership, while in the following weeks Mark deals with the place of children, relationships and faithfulness in our community organisations.

While I agree with most commentators that here we again find the Markan theme of the disciples’ lack of understanding about Jesus teaching and leadership, I suggest Mark’s Jesus is dealing with something far more complex and profound.

Rather, Mark’s Jesus is addressing the dynamics of community life, central to which are competition, cooperation and leadership struggles in the process of transformation.

2. Ralph D Stacey suggests that according to the science of complexity and psychoanalytic explanations of creativity in group life, each human system consists of two subsystems (*Complexity and Creativity in Organizations*).

One subsystem is a legitimate, dominant system. It is a stable system with clear, rational, stated outcomes and values, rules, clear roles, with conformity determining everything. Leadership is determined by those in power.

The second subsystem is a recessive or shadow system. It is unstable, represents individual and small-cell diversity, as well as the real but unexpressed dissatisfaction, envy, competition, and all that has been displaced by the dominant system.

For Stacey these two subsystems, the dominant and the recessive, are necessary for life. The challenge is that they both can co-exist and that adaption and transformation happens as they interact.

3. Stacey’s insights came to life for me this week in the arena of earrings and the internal life of the Liberal Party. This story gently and humanly reflects the clash of subsystems in the internal life of the Liberal Party, and it reflects the group life of all political parties.

Tony Wright of *The Age* aptly entitled this story, *Political career that had a certain earring about it comes to a close* (*The Age*, Thursday, September 17, 2009, p 10). Brendan Nelson exited parliament last week with a disclosive valedictory speech. It both revealed the reasons for his earring and the way dominant subsystems shape its members, create inflexible values and fiercely determine who and what its leaders should be.

At age 17, his girlfriend suggested he wear an earring, which he gladly did. Then when he was campaigning for the blue-ribbon seat of Bradfield in 1994, the campaign team agonised over whether he should wear it. He did and had to face fierce reactions. He related the event in these words:

Two people an hour would ring and say, 'I am not voting for a bloke with an earring,' and then hang up. But the highlight of the campaign was three days before polling day. Five very serious, stern-faced ladies from the electorate arrived in my office. I knew it was a serious matter because they all declined a cup of tea. They all sat on the opposite side of the table to me and the appointed spokesperson leaned forward and said, 'Dr Nelson, I will get straight to the point: you have an earring.' I said, 'Yes.' She said, 'We believe you are a homosexual.' It is not that funny! I struggled with my thoughts, and I said, 'I am not. I can assure you that I am not.' At this point this woman leaned across the table, banged her fist down and said, 'Yes, but can you prove it?'

The real story behind my earring: Brendan Nelson The Age, September 17, 2009

Without a doubt these “five very serious, stern-faced ladies from the electorate”, to use Brendan Nelson’s words, were respectful and sensible women. And, I am not intending to slight any Liberal Party member. What we see here, I suggest, is how a dominant system so powerfully influences and shapes good people. And they over-identify with an organisation and its values.

Yet, Brendan Nelson was not willing to be subsumed to this dominant subsystem. He chose to openly express different values, and a second shadow, recessive subsystem, even when they produced anxiety and reaction. And Brendan Nelson would not have been saying he was not a homosexual because he was homophobic. And, the women may not have been anti-homosexual either. They just wanted a dominant blue-ribbon male, Anglo-Saxon, professional, straight leader to represent what they thought were the Liberal Party’s dominant system’s best profile!

And, as a quick aside, new rising Liberal star Kelly O’Dwyer would not have won preselection last Thursday as a young woman for the plum Liberal seat of Higgins unless she was validated – groomed, broomed, blooded - by a powerful, dominant male politician like Peter Costello.

4. Returning to our text in Mark 9, we find the followers of Jesus lobbying for power. They obviously exist between two systems or schemas of meaning and practice. The two schemas being: the teaching of Jesus with his schema of meaning, which they **espouse**, and then their **in-use** schema. Jesus calls them to equality, they choose to compete for the best positions. This is human reality. It is not just a matter of misunderstanding. This is not just about being rational. It is not just linear learning. Here Jesus is calling them to realise, own and transform their behaviour. And this is not an easy thing to do.

Stacey describes this resistance to learning about **espoused** and **in-use** schemas, **Learning Model 1**. In this model,

People engage in group interaction ... to win and not lose; retain unilateral control of any situation to avoid embarrassing others or embarrassing themselves and to contain and to restrict the effective participation in decision making to as few people as possible... they conceal their opinions and use factual information selectively to manipulate people.” (143)

Learning Model 11 is a double-loop learning. Defensiveness is noted and set aside, embarrassment is endured, fear and anxiety are allowed in their life, and braving the anxiety of exposing assertions to public testing and being open to allow one’s mind to be changed.

Without causing embarrassment, but with directness, Jesus seeks to lead his followers into a Learning Model 11 approach by addressing competition and power-seeking by calling a child into their midst as a symbol of a life of “the way of the cross”. Such choice for a symbol of greatness was shocking for that time. Children had not status or rights. They were placed at the bottom of the social and economic scale.

Age divisions and ...power and responsibility, were hierarchical... Authority ran vertically downwards. Age and tradition were revered and powerful... Early training was harshly disciplined. It was not until early adulthood that a young person began receiving serious consideration as a member of the family group.

(Carney, in Ched Myers, **Binding the Strong Man**, 261)

In this act, Jesus teaches that God affirms lowliness. Yet the challenge here is a twofold challenge:

1. to be lowly, vulnerable and
2. to support and work for the equality, rights and needs of children, the lowly, the helpless and vulnerable in every society.

As well as leading to openness to learn about their inconsistency in espoused and in-use values, behaviour and their meaning systems and practice.