

21 March 2021 – Mark 9:30 – 10:52

Bible reading Mark 9:30 – 10:52

In our reading last week, Jesus started telling the disciples about his impending rejection and death. Today's reading reveals how much the disciples did or did not understand about this costly call to follow.

Jesus asked the disciples what they were arguing about on the way. But they were silent, because they'd been arguing about who was the greatest.



Jesus sat them all down and said to them: 'Whoever wants to be first must be last



of all and servant of all.' Picking up a child, he said, 'Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me, as well as the one who sent me. But woe to you if you put a stumbling block before any of these little ones. It would be better to be maimed or blinded than to

prevent someone entering the kingdom of God. Further, everyone must enter the kingdom of God as a little child.' And Jesus blessed the children brought to him.

Later, some Pharisees came and tested Jesus by asking whether it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife ...

Do you agree that the Law of Moses states that it's allowable for a man to write a certificate of dismissal and so divorce his wife? In response, Jesus said that this command was only written because of people's hardness of heart. God's aim from the beginning of creation was that a man would leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they would become one flesh, no longer two, but one. Therefore no one should separate what God has joined together.





As Jesus was setting out again, a man rushed up and asked him a serious theological question: 'Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'

Jesus responded by reminding him of the 10 commandments: You shall not murder; You shall not steal; Honour your father and mother. But then Jesus added another demand 'You lack one thing. Go, sell what you

own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'

The man was shocked and went away sad, for he had many possessions.

Jesus looked around at the disciples and said, 'How hard it will be for those who are rich to enter the kingdom of God!'. The disciples were astonished and asked one another, 'Who then can be saved?' Jesus replied, 'For God all things are possible.'

Then they were on the road again, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was telling them once more what was to happen to him, predicting that he would be handed over to the chief priests and scribes and condemned to death, and then three days later rise again. With these words still sounding in their ears, James and John came up to Jesus and asked him straight out, 'Grant one of us to sit at your right hand and one at your left, when you come in your glory.'



Jesus said to them, 'You don't know what you are asking. ... to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant. It is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

The other ten disciples began to get angry with James and John.



Jesus called them together and said to them, 'Gentile leaders lord it over their subjects and act as cruel tyrants. But among you, whoever wishes to become great must become your servant. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

Eventually they came to Jericho, just a day's journey from Jerusalem. Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, was there, sitting by the roadside. When he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was passing

through, he began to shout out and cry, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Jesus called the blind man over and asked him what he wanted. 'I want to see again.' Jesus said, 'Go;

your faith has made you well.' And immediately the man regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way, up towards Jerusalem.



SERMON – The cost of discipleship

I wonder what you talk about when you go on road trips – either with your spouse or with friends. Do you talk about safe topics like the weather or what you want to eat for lunch? Or perhaps you venture into more controversial topics like politics and current affairs? Or is a long road trip the opportunity to go deep and talk about your hopes and fears for the future?

In our reading from Mark's Gospel this morning, Jesus is on a road trip with the disciples, travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem, a distance of around 150 kilometres by way of the Jordan River and Jericho. This would take about a week to walk ...



So there was plenty of time for

conversation ... and it's interesting what was on the mind of Jesus and what was in the minds of the disciples as they walked this road. It seems that **Jesus** had his mind firmly on what awaited him in **Jerusalem**.



On at least three occasions Mark records Jesus speaking openly about the rejection, betrayal and death that awaits him in Jerusalem. This impending sense of a final and violent showdown with the



religious authorities sets the context for all the conversations that occur on the way. The disciples don't understand any of this and are afraid to ask Jesus about it.

It seems their minds are closed off to the possibility and indeed probability of what will happen. So what are **they** talking about? Their focus is on who is the **greatest** among them as they jockey for positions of **power** and **influence**.

Jesus is thinking in **very concrete terms** about what happens when powerful opponents feel threatened. The disciples, meanwhile, are off somewhere in **La La land** ... thinking about themselves and the glorious future that lies ahead ... a bit like the scene in JC Superstar where they talk about having made it and retiring in comfort to write the Gospels. They are out of touch with reality and emotionally unprepared for what lies ahead.

All the conversations that happen on the road are challenging and all of them point to the cost and dangers of discipleship.

We won't focus this morning on the **divorce question** except to say that there is more nuance here than we might imagine. Jesus challenges **male privilege** and **male power** that allowed men to treat women as objects to be disposed of.



Given the recent revelations and protests just this week, it seems that we men are so slow to see that we have perpetuated systems that disempower and penalise women. Shame on we men!

Jesus and the early Christian movement were actually quite radical in emphasizing the **equality** of women and men before God. We

still have so far to go to make this a lived reality.

Another topic where Jesus is very radical and yet we are so slow to learn is the danger of **wealth**. The warning here to all of us is don't let your possessions or money stop you

from fully embracing the way of Jesus. The man who questions Jesus about eternal life knows and obeys the 10 Commandments, but this is not enough according to Jesus. What this man can't see is that he loves his wealth and his possessions more than following God. How do we know that? Because he can't bear to part from them. They have a stranglehold over his life. It is like the seed sown among thorns in the earlier parable about the sower.



Today this remains a culturally subversive message as our capitalist system is built around people wanting more and more **stuff** that needs to be paid for with more and more **money**. Our whole political and commercial system is built around the myth of continual economic growth.

Country Overshoot Days 2021

When would Earth Overshoot Day land if the world's population lived like...

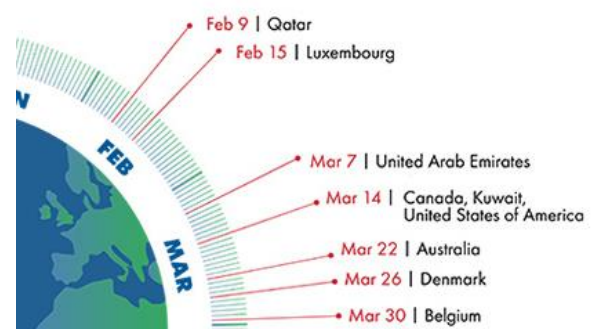


Source: National Footprint and Biocapacity Accounts, 2021 Edition
data.footprintnetwork.org



year, which suggests that as Australians we need more than four earths to sustain our present lifestyle.

This week Australia will pass its **earth overshoot day**, the day of the year when – if every person on the planet lived like Australia – we would use up the capacity of the earth's ecology to sustain life. We are not yet a quarter of the way through the



The great challenge for us as individuals and as a wealthy church community is how we balance being a **good steward** of our resources and being **generous** and **bold** in building God's kingdom. In our Exploring Faith discussion this week, we were further challenged by the difference between being financially **generous** – which is often the prerogative of the rich – and seeking God's **justice** where all people – including our neighbours in PNG

and Timor Leste and our own indigenous people – have the same access to services and Covid vaccines and even food that we take for granted. This week the Federal government acted swiftly to address the deteriorating Covid situation in PNG, which was good to see.



The final word that Jesus offers on this topic is that ‘all things are possible for God’. So let us pray that we will be open to God’s leading in this important aspect of our lives.

The other key topic of discipleship that is raised is the notion of **greatness**. This is the rallying cry of former US President **Donald Trump** – the notion of **making America great again** – by oppressing people of colour, ignoring the needs of other countries and by grabbing on to power by whatever means available. In other words, become great by focusing all your efforts on your own self interests.



The approach of Jesus is the complete **opposite** of this. If you want to be considered great, then **serve** others. To emphasise his point, Jesus makes a show of **welcoming children**, whom the disciples were trying to shoo away. In first century culture, children

had no power and very low status, just the sort of person Jesus was drawn to and welcomed with open arms. Whoever welcomes a child – a nobody – in Jesus’ name welcomes Jesus, and indeed welcomes God ...

On this point you may have read in the newsletter that we’ve received an approach from Kids Hope Australia who are asking us to consider



entering a partnership with a local primary school to provide one on one mentoring for one hour per week for vulnerable children. We are hoping to have someone from Kids Hope come and speak to us about this enriching program, but please speak to me if you’d like to know more.

Finally, **Jesus offers his own life as a model on how to serve others.** Those who want to put themselves first will be last ... while those who serve others will be considered great ... As Jesus expresses it ...

The Son of Man came, not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)

Looking ahead to the events of Easter, this is how Mark presents Jesus' understanding of his death. It is neither random nor unexpected. Jesus instinctively knew what awaited him in Jerusalem. Mark is telling us how Jesus viewed his impending death and the image we have is of the suffering servant figure in Isaiah chapter 53 ...

*Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin ...
after the suffering of his soul he will see the light of life ...
The righteous one, **my servant**, will make many righteous,
and will bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will allot him a portion among the **great** ...
because he poured out his life to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors. (Isaiah 53:10-12)*

Jesus came to serve 'many' – especially through his death which acts like a **ransom** – the price of **freedom** or **redemption**. Just as in Isaiah the suffering and death of the servant figure redeems Israel, here Jesus will give his life to redeem many. This is the way that disciples and followers of Jesus are encouraged to exercise their leadership, not in a grasping or power seeking way but in a way that serves the needs of others first, which may well be very costly, as many of you know.

There is room for just one more short episode in Mark's Gospel before Jesus reaches Jerusalem on the day we celebrate next Sunday as Palm Sunday.



This episode is the second healing of a blind man, Bartimaeus. The two healing stories about blind people frame these middle chapters of the Gospel that focus on discipleship.

In this second story, Bartimaeus regains his sight and follows Jesus on the way up towards Jerusalem and all that awaits Jesus there. The

unspoken question we are left with at this point in Mark's story is this:

Having heard the cost that comes from following Jesus, will we continue to walk his way, the way of service and the way of suffering?