**EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST - 23 Sept. 2018 - Mark 9. 30-37**

Despite his magnificent signs and wonders, the woebegone disciples were still clueless about the outcome of Messiah’s mission to planet earth. Jesus told them that he would be betrayed and condemned as a blasphemer by the religious leaders, the self-promoted power barons. These experts could not tolerate his competition from the radical grace of God, which accompanied Jesus’ association with the underclass, the impure ones, and his forgiveness of their sins.

The ignorant, faith-lacking disciples feared Jesus’ upside-down notion of unworldly powerlessness, when compared to the right-way up worldly way. And, remembering the rebuke that Peter collected when he sought to steer Jesus from his foreshadowed path to the cross, instead of asking more questions, the disciples let descend dense, dumb silence.

To distract from their fear, they found tongues to quarrel in a most dis-edifying and insensitive manner: if Jesus got the chop, who was most worthy to take over as party top dog? The world around them, was one where the rich associated only with the rich, and the “greatest” had more money, more influence, more power, more smugness, and more friends.

This worldly ambition for top doggery infected the disciples with exaltation of personal prestige and overweening ambition. How should the disciples ballot their choice? Should it be he who tallied up the greatest number of healings done? Or, was it the one with superior demon-chasing skills? No, the three who saw the Lord’s transfiguration on the mountain, must surely outdo the rest left in the valley below.

Jesus seemed to let the team pull the wool over his eyes and asked innocently what they had been arguing about? But, they were too embarrassed to own up.

Regrettably, the recent Canberran “Night of the Long Knives” showed that pollies who seek power, suffer a serious. They shift all their focus onto themselves, their own desires, their own goals, and the devil take the hindmost. Their creed is “Never let a good deed go unpublished.” So, they appear aproned in a soup kitchen, or squat in a silly cap among tiny poo-packets in a child-minding centre, only so long as the cameras click, and then, they’re gone, gone back to continue their selfish power grab elsewhere. In the meantime, the people of low status, the demanding, time-consuming ones, the weak and vulnerable ones, they would re-locate them to the back of their minds.

This kind of wolfish behaviour broke Jesus’ heart. Topsy-turvy Jesus turned upside down the social ranking system. He taught his disciple team that true greatness, holding the highest position in his community, lay in being the *servant* of all, not by ascending the social ladder, but, by descending it. The way to be tops in his kingdom was to come down to the lowest place, to have your focus on the needs of others, and to work on making their lives better for your having been there. His true greatness meant caring for and serving the least ones, the ones from whom we can expect no reward. And, the way to gain honour is to receive those who have no honour to give in return. Not only are these sometimes our beloved ill and frail ones, but the people up at K-Mart, and the Glen and Forest Hill, who have let themselves go, the fragrant unwashed, the people who sleep rough, and, now, the asylum seekers. When we welcome the least of these, we welcome the presence of our Christ into our lives, who chose to become one of them.

To point up his idea of true discipleship, as an example of the least ones, with whom he totally identified, Jesus wrapped a little child in his arms, high fived her and hugged her close to his heart. In Jesus’ day, a child was at the base of the pecking order, a child had no economic value, had no material wealth, no societal status, and was devoid of any rights or protection. She was only half a human until she could be married off. The Greek word for child was neither a he nor a she, only an ‘it.’ Of all the little people, an unwanted baby girl was in the hands of her father. Entirely dependent and vulnerable to his will, she was at the risk of being thrown out into a lane-way, exposed to the carrion predators.

If his disciples were still as thick as a piece of four by two, they may well have felt offended when Jesus maintained that some street urchin was more important to him, than they were. And, they had given up so much to be his disciples. Thought bubbles rose from their quizzical minds: “Surely he has it all wrong? Surely, a helpless child cannot be the nature of God’s wish?” But, the Christmas story tells us that this was precisely the route God chose for us and for our salvation, coming into our world as a mewling baby on cow-slobbered manger straw.

May I end by dipping into the prologue to *Alice in Wonderland*? Recent events in Canberra ended with *Malice in Blunderland*. “Child of the pure, unclouded brow, and dreaming eyes of wonder, though time be fleet and I and thou are half a life asunder, thy loving smile will surely hail the love gift of a fairy tale.” Jesus came as a tiny babe into a world of blinding snow and storm wind’s moody madness. He came to make our world a fairy-tale place of silver laughter, a place of child-hood’s nest of gladness. Jesus chose to come, because we so needed him, for, the tale tells us, “we are but older children, dear, who fret to find our bed-time near.” If we choose to follow his urging, Lewis Carroll ends saying “His magic words shall hold thee fast. Thou shalt not heed the raving blast. It shall not touch with breath of bale, the pleasance of our fairy tale.” Thanks be to God. Amen.