

28 March 2021

Writings: Unlikely People

The Centurion said, "Truly this man was God's son" (Mark 15:39)

People often ask me from where do I get my Sermon ideas. I often get them from books I read, or stories I have heard or Scripture Commentaries I consulted to better understand the Bible text I am using for my Sermon. Yet, there are times when none of these sources help me. I recall once really struggling to write a Sermon and had to interrupt my work to go visit a Grade Two Class. While I was there I overheard two students talking about something and it gave me a great idea for my Sermon. There are times when the best ideas come from the most unlikely people or situations.

In today's Gospel, it is a Roman Centurion who best understands the identity of Jesus by calling him God's Son. The man demonstrates how faith can be found in almost anyone.

The identity of Jesus is a prominent theme in Mark's Gospel. In the early sections, Jesus appears to keep his identity a secret by telling demons who identify him to be quiet. Later at the Transfiguration, Christ is called "my Son, the Beloved" by the voice from the cloud but then tells those who witnessed the event to tell no one until after his death and resurrection. During his trial, Jesus admits to the High Priest he is the "Messiah, Son of the Blessed One" but this is used as a reason for his crucifixion. Throughout his Gospel, Mark is trying to make it clear one cannot fully understand Christ's identity and mission apart from his death. The moment after he died, the Centurion gives the best answer to the question "Who is Jesus": truly he is God's Son. Yet, this Centurion was the Roman soldier in charge of the execution of Jesus. He was likely a pagan with no knowledge of what Jesus did while he was alive, what the Old Testament revealed about a future Messiah or Judaism in general. His spontaneous recognition of Christ's identity would have been prompted by God's help and perhaps the realization something profound had just occurred. The most unlikely person in Mark's Gospel was still capable of spiritual insight.

During this Covid-19 pandemic, a lot of attention has been focused on prominent people involved in the crisis. Government ministers make announcement about vaccine procurement and distribution. Medical experts encourage people to get vaccinated and try to explain how the variant strains will affect public health. Journalists appear daily to provide news and analysis of how well Canada is doing in the fight against the virus compared to other countries. Yet, with the exception of a few publicly staged events, the work of a lot of ordinary people gets ignored: the janitor who disinfects hospital hallways to help limit the spread of Covid-19; the cooks who make the meals for residents of long term care homes; the people who try to do contract tracing and receive a lot of abuse for their efforts. These unlikely individuals are the ones who are winning the war against the virus. It is highly doubtful any will receive the recognition they so richly deserve other than the thanks public figures direct at everyone. Yet, their actions speak loudly and deeply about their identity as citizens (and possibly people of faith) and their mission to build a better world.

Mark's story of the Roman Centurion's statement reveals how unlikely people often utter the most profound truths. This experience continues to happen today. The question is whether our eyes and ears are open to recognize it.

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