

Sermon on Wednesday 26 November 2021 by Melanie Seward, Lay Reader

Readings: Psalm 49. 1-10 & Mark 10. 32-45

'Not so with you'



I've been getting fed up with what's on TV, but lately we have started watching *Mare of Easttown* - it's about a detective from Pennsylvania who is trying her best to prevent her life from falling apart while investigating a mysterious murder. As she is struggling, the authorities send her the latest smart up-and-coming detective - just what she thinks she does not need. In the episode we watched last night, they sit at the bar and he reveals what his life is really like: "If someone had told me I would be sitting here alone in life and stuck in my job instead of the high-flying promotion, I would not have believed it." He is thirty.

Throughout the drama in this backwater town, a key theme seems to be how the characters set a value on themselves and one another. Their status is respected or dismissed on the state of their relationships, the nature of their lifestyle, lack of achievement jobwise, weaknesses concerning mental health; and often just how they look is seen to give them a positive or negative value. In our society, people's apparent worth and

status are often tied up with achievement, productivity and power; anyone who does not score on this basis can be seen as having little relevance.

Psalm 49 reminds us that, 'both low and high, rich and poor alike' are equal when it comes to death. No-one can use their riches or power to redeem their life, to buy the opportunity to live forever. The cost of such redemption or, in Old Testament terms, paying the ransom, is beyond any human's capability.

In the gospel, we have James and John trying to curry favour with Jesus, going behind the backs of the other disciples. They want to ensure that when Jesus sits in glory that they are on his lefthand and righthand-side; in other words, they are seeking a guarantee of a status above their fellow disciples. With hindsight, it can seem incredible to us that James and John would do this. In Mark's account, Jesus is travelling and teaching on the road to Jerusalem and yet again telling the disciples about his coming betrayal and his shameful, humiliating death to come. Soon afterwards they are gainsaying positions for themselves when Jesus sits in glory. Quite clearly, they have grasped nothing of what Jesus has said about what is going to happen but, instead, still see Jesus as the man from God who will sit on an earthly throne in triumph against the forces raging against Israel. When the rest of the group discover what is going on they all start to bicker.

Meanwhile, Jesus is walking the path of ministry, service and sacrifice. He has to spell it out that he is calling them to walk the same path. He says to them: You are called to rethink your values. You know what it is like in the world, people lord it over others - rulers, officials and the rest. *"Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

I don't know about you, but these words, 'Not so with you,' echo around my brain. The same temptations and distractions obscure our lives – we, like the disciples, consciously and subconsciously think and act in terms of status – worth - in worldly terms. Jesus challenges us; to question that more is better, to stand against the view that some people are of more value than others, to not act as if achievement trumps service and not believe that simply the use of force can engineer security and peace. To stand with Jesus and walk his Way is to turn values upside down.

Later, the Psalmist makes it clear; there are two ways to value life. We can use wealth, pleasure and power to value life or, life is valued by what or whom we place our trust, our faithfulness. Those that trust in themselves – in their own achievements and abilities - will perish, *'but (the psalmist writes) God will redeem my life from the grave; he will surely take me to himself'*. Although the Psalmist would have been unlikely to have a fully developed belief in life after death, his hope - his faithfulness - lies with things of God. For us with God's Son, Jesus, who embodied the love of God for all by making the ultimate sacrifice on the cross, the impossibility of redeeming human life has been made possible; it is a reality. Like the disciples, we are called to rethink our values, serve all and, regardless of status, our response is to be shaped by our shared humanity; we place our hope and faithfulness in the things of God.