# Morningside Sermon 10.30am 20/9/15

# Do you understand?

*Proverbs 31:10-31; Mark 9:30-37*

Recently I have had cause to work with school teacher from my high school days – to help with a family funeral. We had a little time to reminisce over the teachers from my time at the school – most of them retired now. The teachers of English and History who inspired my love of the past and of literature; the brave Business teacher who taught half of the first fifteen to touch type on Friday afternoons because we weren’t allowed to play any game that would make us unfit for the Saturday match; the Games master who, when it was too windy or wet to walk to the playing fields, used to drive his car up to the touch line – and referee from there through a megaphone.

And then there was Granny Struth. Fourth year Maths. Not my favourite teacher, but the one who through her patience, will-power and encouragement got me through O grade maths. Whatever it took, she would do it. However long we had to sit, she would sit with me. She was determined that I would pass (she was probably determined to get me out of her classroom). We laughed, we cried, we struggled. After explaining some Byzantine law of Trigonometry or Algebra (and no, I’ve never needed them in real life) she would ask, sometimes with a sigh, sometimes with a glimmer of hope, “Do you understand?”

Lord, how I tried to understand. I memorised everything, but I couldn’t apply it. It didn’t mean anything, but I knew it was important to get through this time of trial, and with her astonishing fortitude, I did, just. Still can’t to percentages or mental arithmetic, or why SOH/CAH/TOA means in Trigonometry, but for that dark exam time in May 1978, I understood enough.

“Do you understand?”

Throughout Mark’s gospel the disciples, called and commissioned by Jesus, given special instruction by Him, privileged to be with Him in the highs and lows of His ministry, nevertheless get a bad press. They say inappropriate things. They keep children away from Jesus. They wonder about who is going to be more important in God’s Kingdom and have seats of honour. They are anxious when they should be sleeping, and sleep when they should be anxious. Continually they misunderstand what Jesus is teaching and doing. Jesus keeps asking them, “Do you understand?”

I wonder to what extent the disciples are mirrors for followers of Jesus in all ages, including today? Our slowness to get the point about what Jesus is about; our persistence in setting our minds on human things instead of trying to work through what God means and God wants us to do. If we become discouraged by seeing our thoughts and actions and lack of understanding reflected in the disciples – take heart – Jesus got them in the end, and gave them new things to do.

Another thing we need to know – and it helps us when we try to work out how to use the Bible today and apply it to our own lives. When Mark was writing His gospel in the 60s AD, the early Christian Church was going through a grim time of persecution, abuse, and lived in fear. The faith of the church was under attack, and the Christians of Mark’s day were constantly struggling with people stopping worshipping, and stopping believing, and giving up on faith. There were lot of temptations to drift away from making a commitment to Jesus and to faith. It was tough then in Mark’s time to be a Christian, and for many people it is tough today still.

Jesus asked – “Do you understand?” He tried to tell them, show them, model for them, what He had come to do, and what His teaching meant. Sometimes they’d get close to it, and other times He was met with blank looks, and silence. Maybe they really didn’t get it, what Jesus meant about what it was going to take to be one of His followers, and what being faithful to God was going to mean for Him: a cross, death, and rising from the dead. Maybe their stubborn silence was that they maybe had more of an idea than they were letting on but simply didn’t want to know because they already had an inkling about what it was going to mean to be a follower of Jesus, believing that He would be brought to a cross, and die, and then something else that they couldn’t really get their minds around, rising from the dead. And who could blame them?

So Jesus does something else. They were back in Capernaum, by the shores of Galilee. The home town of Peter and Andrew, James and John. You can still see what is claimed to be Peter’s house to this day on that ancient site, and the synagogue where Jesus preached and worshipped. And gathering His followers around Him, Jesus spots, perhaps playing nearby, perhaps watching what was going on from the edge of the crowd, a child. He calls the little child into the circle where the disciples were sitting or standing, and Jesus puts His arm around the child’s shoulders. Children in Jewish society, though loved by their families, were the lowliest of the low. They had no status and no position. They were utterly dependent on adults to look after them and care for them. And Jesus says to His followers, with His arm round the child’s shoulders, “Accept little ones like this, vulnerable, uncertain, needy, dependent. Care for little ones like this, and you will show that You care for Me. Care about little ones like this, and you will be showing by your actions that you care about God.” I wish Jesus had said again, “Do you understand?”

The disciples may not have understood the teaching about suffering and dying and resurrection. It’s not easy, it still leaves us wondering and grappling with meaning. But would the disciples, and the people who first read Mark’s gospel, have understood the connection between caring for the vulnerable and needy and dependent as a sign of what it was they believed and Who it was they believed in – I think maybe, just maybe, they did.

One of the things we need to work at with our Christian faith is the understanding that it is all right to ask questions. Why didn’t they disciples, with Jesus right there in front of them, ask Him, “Hang on, what do you mean about suffering and dying and rising from the dead? I don’t get it.” But the disciples didn’t understand, and they were afraid to ask Him. Just as, I suspect, many of us would be today. We don’t want to reveal our ignorance, or our doubts, or our lack of, we think, faith.

Perhaps because of our fear, we stop asking any questions at all, and sit in silence or, like many one-time followers of Christianity, simply drift away. It’s too hard to understand. It’s too hard to believe. Of course, it might well be that we understand all too well, we know what it is that Jesus asks of us and what He means, and that’s too hard too. To do what He asks of us requires response and action on our part, and we’re maybe too busy, or have too many options, or don’t like being told what’s expected. It feels like He’s judging us.

Rather than preaching a sermon explaining the theology, and outlining the need to believe in so many challenging things, Jesus tries a different tack. Not that we have to become like children – and childish in our faith; but that we are to care for the vulnerable and needy, the people on the edges and who struggle at different times and in different ways to cope. Maybe not always in need, but some times. And we are called to help.

And then I imagine Jesus asking us – “All right then, do you understand that? Do you get that? I’ve shown you what faith and trust and action look like. Do you think you might be able to do something like that. For Me? With Me?”

Working out what we think and believe about God, and Jesus, and the Spirit, and the nature of the Church, and what the Bible is, and what we think about baptism and communion – that matters. And if we don’t understand, we should ask. There’s no shame in not understanding. There is in being too afraid, or indifferent, to ask. We might even get an answer we understand, or at least help us a little bit on the way of faith, so that we get through to the next bit.

Fourth year Maths; something terrible about Trigonometry, and Granny Struth, the Maths teacher, put her hand on my shoulder and asked, “Do you understand?” I understood enough. Not to become a mathematician, but enough to get me through to the next bit.

C1st Capernaum, with the disciples gathered around, Jesus puts His arm around a child’s shoulder; a vulnerable, totally dependent, needy child. Showing what it meant to accept, welcome, care and love. And looking at His disciples, even though He didn’t say it, His eyes read, “Do you understand?”

Two thousand years later, we’re here, as Christians, because they did. Two thousand years from now, will there be Christians, because we understood too, and did something about what we believed. I am sure there will be.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

**Amen**