Arthur Barrett Institution 020414

Mark 9: 30-37

I'm delighted to be here with you - and with Arthur, Brigid and their family today. It gives me the opportunity of commending to you someone whom I know to be hard working, deeply caring and compassionate - a faithful priest with a deep sense of God's call to him and to his congregation.

The things which congregations hope for when the new Rector and Dean arrives are probably quite complex. Like all choosing in the life of faith, it's difficult. I heard myself saying to a Vestry recently - and it had that strange feeling that I was listening to somebody else - that the moment to rise and anoint is the moment when you discern that the vocation of the priest is aligned with the vocation of a congregation. Parishes are on a journey to which they are called by God. And so are clergy.

So what might we expect to happen when Arthur and Brigid have unpacked the last of the boxes. Well there will be - shall we say - expectations in the congregation. Some of them are legitimate and reasonable. We are a very a relational church. So people expect friendship. They expect their Rector and his family to settle down and become part of the community. They expect that their priest will be faithful, that he will be kind, that he will be an encourager who opens up possibilities rather than closing them down, that he will be a leader who seeks to discern the will of God.

I found this nice comment this week: 'All congregations know what kind of leader they want--the perfect one, the singular leader who, like Moses or Jesus, talks with God, inspires our confidence, tells us what to do, scolds us when necessary, reassures us when we're scared, teaches us how to be faithful, devotes his/her entire life to our needs, and, depending on the situation, parts water, walks on it, or turns it into wine.'

In the Gospel reading today, the wistful longings are for clarity - particularly in the area of power and authority. The disciples can see that the group of people surrounding Jesus are a chaotic muddle. What is needed is clarity and order - and who better than them to provide that them to provide it.

The Jesus way of responding to that is different. He reminds them that the leader will suffer and die. He picks up a child and sets him in the midst. The message is clear. The focus must be on the most vulnerable. Leaders must be servants, teachers must be learners, rulers must be slaves. And - to push on - reconcilers must be reconciled and healers don't have to be wounded but it probably helps.

Now you may be wondering whether a Rector like that is worth his stipend. After all we have buildings to maintain, money to raise, congregations to build. Of course you have. And those things need to be done.

But we need to understand that servant leaders in the model of Jesus do not start by offering false and alluring clarity about complex things. Clarity narrows the options - servant leadership opens up a space in which we can hear one another and listen to God in one another. And sometimes in that space, conventional ideas about power, authority and leadership will be questioned. It's risky stuff.

And things will get done. Unexpected things will get done. People will be changed. The congregation will experience transformation. Nothing will quite look the same as it did before. And that's because what happens will happen not so much by driven organisation as by love, service, grace and gentleness.

I used the word driven - as a warning to myself because I listen to myself and yearn for clarity - for strategic plans, for flow charts, to-do lists and all the rest. I listen to the disciples wanting places of honour and, while their ambition may have been partly for rank, I think it was probably also for order and clarity. The so-called Francis effect in the Catholic Church is about what begins to happen when the mood of church is altered by a demonstration of servant leadership.

It's been a privilege to be here today. May this be a moment when vocation of priest and vocation of the congregation begin to be in alignment. May those who want to be first learn to be last and servant. And may God's will be done.