Sermon on Mark 10:35-45 (Proper 29 2015)
Draw Near to God – Stewardship 2015

Recently I went on a hike and in an effort to keep my small backpack light I skimped on the water.

It’s amazing how much worse thirst is when you’re at least a couple of hours from whetting your whistle! It’s not just the dry throat and the feeling that someone has stuck cotton balls on your tongue, you start wondering if the lack of hydration is going to make your limbs flake off.

Now, let’s ramp it up. Imagine, for whatever reason, maybe like today’s refugees, or like my own ancestors a couple of generations ago, you find yourself walking along a desolate path; its dry, it’s dusty; there’s no water around that you can see; your body is crying out from a deeply parched place.

As you round the corner of a hill, you see a small dilapidated, abandoned shack, more like a hut; you look inside and there is a well complete with a hand pump!

In your excitement you rush forward but as you do you notice an object resting on the well rim: a small tin with water already in it! And attached to the tin by a wire, a thin piece of wood with the following message etched:

*“Stop! Before you drink this water read this! The water in this well is excellent but the pump will not work unless you prime it, so you have a choice, drink this stagnant water left here by the last traveller or use it obtain as much fresh water as you need.”*

What would you do? Would you satisfy yourself at the expense of all who come after or would you trust the message and prime the pump with the water?

As we enter the last six weeks of the Church Year, Advent 1 begins on Nov 29th, we want to take some time to consider what it means to live as a Good Steward. We’re doing this in conjunction with many other parishes in our diocese and collectively we’re calling it “Draw Near to God.”

The story I’ve just shared is germane to that title and to today’s gospel reading, a reading that asks us to imagine and then live into and from a new paradigm of stewardship.

In the verses immediately prior to what we just read in the gospel Mark records this: “They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed and those who followed were afraid.”

That’s a strange sentence, we’re not sure why he’s ahead of everyone and who he’s walking ahead of, exactly, who are the ones amazed, who are the ones afraid?

There’s physical separation between Jesus and his immediate followers and other associates. A sense of stratification is present; Jesus is starting to be viewed, experienced in a hierarchical way; perhaps because now he’s on the road to Jerusalem, the place where his followers expect him to be crowned King.

This emerging stratification then bears some immediately dubious fruit, two ambitious disciples, James and John ask for positions of glory in what they imagine will be the new and permanent administration.

As anthropologists tell us, we humans invent hierarchy because we long for security. If we assign, or allow certain individuals to muscle their way into positions of power and influence, we’re okay with that because it allows each of us to know our place.

There is a place for looking after ourselves, clearly; there’s also a place for ruling; and even ambition to rule, a good reminder for Canadians who seem to think such a desire always unseemly.

There’s a genuine holy ambition that Jesus will touch on later in the story and there’s a naturally good ambition that comes from seeking to develop our gifts and talents and it’s important to separate the different kinds.

But there’s a rot in the whole mess as well and Jesus is about to expose it, the security seeking, the selfish ambition that desires to put him on a pedestal that, ironically, given who he actually is!, resembles the status quo;

all exposed by Jesus saying to James and John, “you don’t know what you’re asking.”

Jesus’ isn’t taunting them with this; rather it serves like the etched message on the can of water; an invitation to something far more healthy and helpful and unlimited, if they will open their hearts to what he is about to tell them.

With all the necessary caveats in place, so it can be for us!

We are still a hierarchically structured society regardless of rhetoric, a society that believes that the only way humans can really operate is to look out for #1

We’ll often say at the end of a conversation in which we’re talking about a decision we need to make “well, of course [those are crucial words], well of course you need to do what’s best for you and your family.”

You’ve probably heard it a thousand times, it really is the tin we drink from; I do too.

But Jesus is not having it. In the face of what humans are like in every place and in all times his words infer that he’s not here to reinforce our stratifying, security-seeking ways of doing things; he doesn’t seem to believe that life is about, first of all, padding ourselves against difficulties of one sort or another.

In terms of our opening image, Jesus has come to prime the pump, to help live from trust in him and God rather than in our own strength and ambition.

He describes what he’s come to do in language that suggests the elimination of distance, the very reason for stratification and selfishness.

Jesus speaks of intimacy and participation, such an intense participation that in the words of the theologian Michael Gorman only the language of liquids will do!

Baptismal water is poured over us and the Eucharistic cup filling James and John, you and I from within. We do not follow Jesus in fear but find him inside us, priming us with the water and wine of his presence to live into a new way of being.

On our own we could not resist the seemingly all-powerful logic that our world urges on us from knee-high to a grasshopper, “of course you need to do what’s best for you and your family.”

But Christ would say “yes, that is in fact true; do what is best for you and your family” but how you get there is by saying “no” to what that usually means!

Jesus is fully aware how empire works, he’s not naïve. Indeed he uses a cluster of words “to rule,” “to lord it over,” “great ones” which suggest that the Roman empire worked exactly like our empires work: honour at the expense of others; domination in the quest for personal power and security.

But Jesus says, and here’s the good news, “But it is not so among you!” Not, think about a different way, consider my example, no, “it is not so among you!”

Christ can say this because at this stage he is prepared to be closer to us than we are to ourselves, because he’s whetted our whistle for a different life.

Our ignorance, our fear and even our amazement are precisely the openings that Christ uses to teach us and not only to teach us but to invite us in to the experience of being a good Steward.

A Steward carefully manages a sacred trust. But if the Steward is afraid, if the Steward is convinced she or he isn’t secure, that there is a tyrant who is ultimately going to take away rather than give, well, then the Steward betrays her role and falls prey to selfish regard.

But if the Steward realizes that there is an endless supply of baptismal and Eucharistic presence then he or she can be a servant for the sake of others.

I think a servant is someone who doesn’t try to deny who she is, with her ambitions and desires, rather she is herself but for others and because she’s for others, she’s in God because that’s God’s story, God is herself for others, Christ is for us!

But outside that divine story all you’ve got is yourself, all you’ve got is your ambition, your willingness to step on others, to greedily take the tin of water for yourself.

But if today, if in your life, you’re willing to trust Christ’s faithfulness to fill you, to prime you, to satiate your thirst, you are willing to begin to live into the divine story of giving, of serving others.

If you do, if you own Jesus’ words, “it is not so among you,” you will move away from fear, you will hang on less and find that what you do give from your time, talent and treasure will be more useful than you thought possible; you will find satisfaction in making a difference for others while respecting yourself.

You will increasingly know how to say “yes” and “no.” Then your ambition to be someone, to be effective, to make a difference will be realized; you will leave a tin of water for whoever comes next.