

The disciples' fear of asking Jesus about his passion prediction does not bode well for them. Earlier in Mark's telling of the story (4:10), coming forward to ask Jesus questions was a sign of the disciples' privileged access to the teacher.

The important place ascribed to questioning would ring a bell for ancient readers from a wide variety of backgrounds. Plato had ascribed a central place to the question-and-answer method in the discovery of truth. The Jewish tradition similarly prized inquiry. Question-and-answer is one of the virtues of Torah study.

It is a serious matter, then, that on the present occasion the disciples do *not* inquire about Jesus' prophecy of death and resurrection, especially since this prophecy goes to the heart of the Christian mystery. In the Markan context the disciples' reluctance to ask is a sign of spiritual malady.

To understand why this is so, we need to expand the context. In chapter 6 Mark says the disciples did not understand about the loaves because their hearts were hardened. Again, in Mark 8 Jesus asks the disciples *Do you not perceive or understand? Has your heart been hardened?* And to Peter Jesus says *Get behind me, Satan! For you are fixing your thoughts not on things of God but on those human things.*

In today's reading we hear, *But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him.* Joel Marcus concludes, the preceding examples suggest that the disciples' present psychological state, what we might call their 'question anxiety,' is part of a deeper disorder of the soul ("hardness of heart"). Sometimes we don't want to know because knowing is too costly.

To ask a question about the passion prediction is not to engage in philosophical speculation about ontology or theological speculation about the inner life of the Trinity. Questions like these have led to endless debates which may be entertaining to those interested in such questions but rarely create unbearable levels of existential angst.

Questions about the passion prediction, however, are not abstract but a matter of life and death. This is the second passion prediction in Mark, and like the first and the third is followed by an incident that illustrates the disciples either real or feigned incomprehension. In each case, this demonstration of apostolic misunderstanding is in turn followed by renewed instruction of the disciples.

Jesus' patience with recalcitrant disciples may be the most convincing evidence of his divine nature. Good teacher that he is, Jesus takes the initiative lost by the disciples and reframes the subject in a manner the disciples cannot ignore. He asks the disciples what they were discussing

on the way. Just as they were afraid to question Jesus, they are now afraid to answer Jesus' question.

The phrase "on the way" is immediately repeated for effect. This is an instance of Mark's irony. God's way has been the subject of the Gospel from its opening verses (1:1-3, "A voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the Lord's way, make straight his paths'").

"The way of the Lord" is a prominent theme in the present section of the Gospel. It is a way of selfless service, of putting oneself last, in order that others may be benefited and God's triumph may be announced. The disciples have, however, chosen another way, the path of self-promotion.

What is helpful to know is that this incident follows close on the story of the Transfiguration, where Jesus segregated himself with three disciples (Peter, James and John), indicating their precedence over the other members of the twelve. It was natural that the question should subsequently arise as to which individual in this inner circle was the greatest.

Jesus returns to his favorite method of teaching; he enacts a parable for the disciples. He takes a child, conveniently at hand. What the English translation loses is the double entendre present in the Greek text: *paidion* can mean either child or slave. Jesus' actions of taking the child into the middle of the circle of disciples, picking him up, and hugging him illustrate the servant-like attitude that he wishes to inculcate.

Infants were often exposed at birth, and this practice was not limited to pagans, though it was probably rarer among Jews than Gentiles. Since *paidion* can designate an infant, it is conceivable that part of the message is to take abandoned infants into one's family. It is also plausible at the time of Mark's writing that persecution of Christians had left some children without parents.

Later Christians were known for their care and support of orphans, and there are many early Christian texts that exhort kindness to them, calling them "children of the church" and urging adults to "act the part of parents," that is, to adopt them. The care of abandoned children is an example of the sort of humble, everyday service to others that Jesus calls for and that is the antithesis of the self-serving attitude that the disciples have just displayed.

Jesus never condemns the disciples' desire to be great; he simply reframes what it means to be great. The way to overcome self-serving passions is not to deny or repress them, but to cultivate a stronger passion. As Harry Emerson Fosdick put it: "Only by a stronger passion can evil passions be expelled."

The way of the Lord is the way of hospitality, of welcoming the stranger, the naked, the hungry, the thirsty, the prisoner, the sick, the homeless child, the refugee. To show great hospitality is the way to become great in the kingdom of God.