

18th Sunday after Pentecost (L25B) – September 23, 2018

Mark 9:30-37

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I'm going to go out on a limb this morning in order to try and make sense of today's reading. I'm not sure this will work for everyone, but I'm going to give it a shot. I think what Jesus is trying to get across to his disciples in this part of Mark's gospel is like wanting to be a superhero and being asked to be a hobbit.

Does that sound crazy? Or maybe you don't have any point of reference for that statement because you're aren't into comic books or superhero movies and you've never read the Lord of the Rings trilogy or seen the movies. I hope to be able to tell you enough to have this make sense. I feel like I have to give a spoiler alert when it comes to Lord of the Rings, but it has been in print for more than 60 years now, and the last movie came out fifteen years ago, so you have had your chance.

Ok, first superheroes. I will confess that I've never been a comic book reader, and the only reason I know anything about the superhero movies is because I have children. So I might get some of the details wrong, but that should make much difference to my overall point. It seems to me that there are four kinds of superheroes. First there's superman, and maybe some others, who are aliens. Superman came from another planet and for that reason has superhuman abilities – like leaping tall buildings in a single bound, x-ray vision, imperviousness to bullets. But he's able to pass for a human being when he puts on horn-rimmed glasses. Second, there are superheroes like the X-men, who are mutants, the beginning of the next stage in human evolution. Each of them has a different superhuman ability – controlling weather, starting fires, telekinesis. Third are the ones like Spiderman – ordinary people who suddenly receive superhuman powers. In Spiderman's case he's bitten by a radioactive spider and gains the ability to shoot webs out of his wrists, climb on all sorts of surfaces, and he's got his "spider sense" that lets him know when he's in trouble. And the fourth is Batman, an ordinary human being except for being super rich and able to have all sorts of useful gadgets made for him – and a cool car. All of these superheroes are called upon in times of crisis and they use their super powers, or super gadgets in Batman's case, to defeat the bad guys and save the day. Superheroes appeal to our desire to be special, to have special abilities, and to be respected by good people and feared by bad people.

Then there is the Lord of the Rings trilogy, and I do know something about this. I've read it several times and have seen all the movies more than once. In the world of Lord of the Rings there are all kinds of extraordinary characters: elves, dwarves, orcs, wizards, trolls, giants, dragons, and a bunch of others. And there are also humans, ordinary folk. But the most ordinary of the ordinary are the hobbits. Hobbits are like humans, except they're much smaller – about 3 ½ feet tall, with bare, hairy feet. They are simple little folk, who like to eat and drink. And it is these ordinary, simple little people who turn out to be the heroes of the story – sort of.

J.R.R. Tolkien, the writer of the trilogy, was a devout Roman Catholic, and this influenced the story he told. One of his main characters is the wizard Gandalf the Grey, who may be seen as a sort of Christ figure. He masterminds a plan to destroy the power of the evil being Sauron by carrying the ring of power into the heart of enemy territory, the Land of Mordor, to be destroyed in the volcanic fire in which it was forged. And the key to this plan is the most ordinary of ordinary people, a Hobbit named Frodo.

Gandalf is Christlike particularly in this way: At one point in the first book, a group of good folk called the Fellowship of the Ring is escorting Frodo to Mordor, Gandalf saves the Fellowship

by getting between them and a giant devil-like character called a Balrog, who has come up from the depths of the mountain. But in the process of saving the Fellowship, he sacrifices his own life, destroying the bridge that he and the Balrog are on so that they both fall into the abyss. We learn later, in the second book, that Gandalf is able to destroy the Balrog on the way down, and through some deep magic is able to come back to life, now as Gandalf the White. It's not much of a stretch to see this as death and resurrection *al la* Jesus.

To make a very long story short, Frodo and his friend Sam, together with Gollum as their guide (a Hobbit who has been corrupted and disfigured by the power of the ring over many centuries) make their way undetected to the mountain and destroy the ring. But even that does not happen in a particularly heroic way. Frodo gives in to the power of the ring and doesn't want to give it up, but Gollum bites his finger off - with the ring, and then falls into the lava - and that's how the ring is destroyed. The plan works out partly due to the hobbits' persistence and faithfulness in making it to the mountain, and through the help they get from others along the way. But in the end it works out in spite their failures. Unlike Superheroes, the hobbits aren't transformed into superhuman (or super-Hobbit) beings, though they have gifts that help them on their journey.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is on the way to the cross. Today is his the second time he tells his disciples that this is where he's going. Last week we heard Peter resist and get called Satan. This week the disciples don't understand what he's talking about, or they just don't want to hear it. Instead, they are still preoccupied with their vision of what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. They're still thinking of him as a conquering hero, a new and better king in Jerusalem. And they're fighting for positions in the new administration. You could say that they have their eyes on the superhero model. They want special power and special status. But Jesus, I think, is really calling them to a Lord of the Rings type of quest: a difficult and dangerous journey that will not make them famous or powerful, but that is part of a bigger plan that will end up destroying the power of sin, death, and evil and ushering in a new, renewed and redeemed creation.

I think that we can fall into the trap the disciples fell into. We want our faith to transform us into extraordinary heroes. We want extraordinary experiences of faith. And we want to be recognized for our goodness and our faithfulness.

What Jesus wants the disciples to see, and what he wants us to understand as well, is that our worldly ambitions and status games are out of place in the kingdom of God. When Jesus took the little child as visual aid, you have to understand that children, especially young children, were not looked on at that time the way we look on young children today - as pure, as innocent, as the "future" - They were the lowest of the low. They were a burden on their families until they could start to pull their own weight. A better image for us today might be a homeless drug addict. Or an illegal alien. "Whoever welcomes someone like *this*, welcomes me."

Jesus calls us to give up on the superhero dream and embrace our identity as "little people," so that we might embrace all the other "little people" who are called, like us, to both repentance and to service. Because those "little people" are key to God's mission to conquer evil once and for all and to finally usher in God's reign in its fullness. Jesus makes us with them partners in this plan and empowers us for this task with the gifts of word and sacrament and the fellowship of the church, to combat evil in the world beginning in ourselves.

And we have that promise that that mission will not be in vain, because in Jesus Christ God became one of us "little ones," and took the fight against sin, death, and evil straight into enemy territory. On the cross he suffered the worst those powers could do, only to walk out of the empty tomb on Easter morning. May we take courage from that promise a delight in our calling. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.