

In our first reading James asks: 'Who is wise and understanding among you?' Interesting question, particularly if asked not only of the disciples, but also ourselves.

Am I the only person here today who has claimed to be wise and acted foolishly? Like, as a young man arguing with my friends that the temperature had been below zero for so long that the ice-covered pond would take one's weight and stepped onto it to prove your point. Or like the older me being the first to answer every question correctly on a driver awareness course – totally disregarding the fact this was my fourth such attendance for speeding.

I wonder if James had the failure of the disciples to grasp clearly what Jesus was telling them about his impending arrest, death and resurrection in mind when he asked the question. Were the disciples simply wise and not wanting not to appear foolish, when they remained silent? After all, Jesus frequently took his disciples aside to teach them in greater depth.

Perhaps they were silent simply because they didn't want to appear stupid. Like the many times in my training groups where the answer to a question asked appeared to me to be so ridiculously obvious that I stayed silent because I'm convinced it will be laughed at by everyone else.

Or maybe it was because they were afraid. This is now the second occasion in a short span of time that Jesus had spoken plainly to the disciples about his death and resurrection, and as Dolapo reminded us last week, that first occasion had ended with Jesus publicly chastising Peter for trying to dissuade Jesus of his chosen course of action. I'm pretty sure the words "Get behind me, Satan" would not be easily forgotten. Fear of being told off, particularly in front of friends, is something many people experience.

Or maybe the disciples were simply afraid of the answer they might receive, as many cancer patients are when hearing their test results from a consultant. Or maybe they were struggling to come to terms with what Jesus had already said and didn't want to hear it repeated. That's certainly true of my 6-year-old granddaughter who has been known to put her hands over her ears so she can't hear her mother telling her something she doesn't want to hear.

And of course, the disciples are not just silent once; their second silence comes after Jesus asks them what they have been arguing about. If the disciples didn't want to think about the reality of what Jesus was saying then it is understandable that they might wish to think about, maybe even dream about the status, honour and power they expected to come to them when the Romans were overthrown. After all this is what the Messiah was supposed to do and why many of them were with Jesus.

This begs the question as to why Jesus would berate his disciples to such an extent that they twice remain silent, because the meek and mild Jesus which I certainly grew up with does not fit the profile we are talking about here.

And surprise, surprise! Over the years wisdom and understanding now sees Jesus not as a meek and mild character but someone advocating in a radical sort of way a totally different understanding of what constituted God's kingdom.

So, when Jesus asks what the disciples had been arguing about, I wonder if Ecclesiastes 3: 7 came into their collective mind: “There is a time to be silent and a time to speak”. What came into my mind when considering this though, was Muhammed Ali who once said: “Silence is golden when you can’t think of a good answer”.

There simply wasn’t a good answer for the disciples to give. Questioning or arguing about rank and status were normal and played an important role in the life of Jewish people at the time even if they were irrelevant to Jesus except to illustrate his upside-down teaching: the last shall be first.

I think this is really what James is getting at when he continues on from his statement about wisdom and understanding: “Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom”. Deeds done in humility or as Jesus put it: “If anyone wants to be the first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all”.

And each and every one of the disciples would have understood that the person in their 1 st century life who was ‘the servant of all’ was the lowest ranking servant in a household; the one who did the most menial and degrading of servant jobs, the one who literally was allowed to eat only what was left after everyone else had eaten their fill.

And then Jesus takes one further radical step by taking a child in his arms. A child, which in their contemporary world held no status whatsoever, contributed little or nothing at all to the economic value of the household and community and traditionally was symbolic of someone who was weak, helpless and totally dependent upon others.

In other words, a child was only as prestigious as a servant who served all... but less useful. Yet here was Jesus showing his disciples in a very practical terms how they should willingly take on the status and tasks of such a person.

What’s more Jesus makes it clear that the disciples, by welcoming children in such a way, equated to them welcoming Jesus himself – and even more, with welcoming the God who had sent him. Here is the very radical Jesus turning upside down centuries of teaching, tradition, wisdom and understanding with a powerful, some would say shocking, depiction of God’s kingdom.

The irony, of course, is that the disciples fail to see until much later, that Jesus’s suffering is not only necessary but also marks the advent of what it means to live in God’s kingdom, namely living and serving with humility, faith and love.

It is only with that wonderful gift called hindsight that we can fully appreciate the difference between how the disciples actually reacted to this radical teaching at the time and how we might have hoped they would have reacted. A reaction illustrated perfectly in this hymn. Let’s sing, Dear Lord and Father of Mankind.