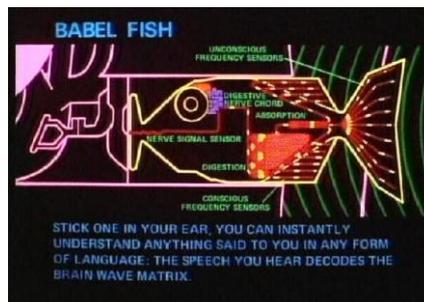
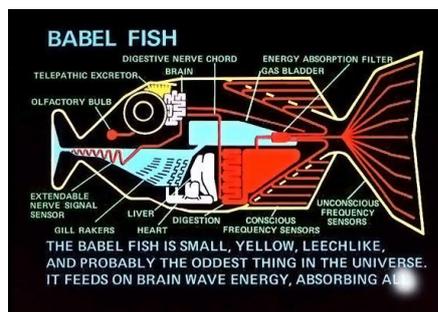


Babel fish and listening to Jesus
– **service and sacrifice at the core of the Gospel**
Isaiah 53:4,10-11; Hebrews 4:14-16; Mark 10:35-45¹

In reflecting about today’s gospel I’ve found myself thinking about babel fish. Babel fish feature quite prominently in Douglas Adams’ ‘Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy’...



“The Babel fish is small, yellow, leech-like, and probably the oddest thing in the universe... It feeds on brain wave energy, absorbing all unconscious frequencies and then excreting telepathically a matrix formed from the conscious frequencies and nerve signals picked up from the speech centres of the brain, ... the practical upshot of which is that if you stick one in your ear, you can instantly understand anything said to you in any form of language [from any Galaxy or universe]...”²

¹ Cycle B – Ordinary 29 – sermon 2012

² *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy: Fit the First* BBC Radio 4 program, broadcast 8 March 1978. Referenced [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babel_fish_\(The_Hitchhiker%27s_Guide_to_the_Galaxy\)#cite_note-2](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babel_fish_(The_Hitchhiker%27s_Guide_to_the_Galaxy)#cite_note-2)

Perhaps more than in any other Gospel, Mark portrays Jesus' disciples as a group of hopeless cases. They always seem behind the play, missing the point of what is plain to *us* as hearers of the story they urgently need a babel fish insertion. As Jesus calls out so often, "Let anyone with *ears to hear* listen!"³ and again, "*Listen* to me, all of you, and *understand...*"⁴

...

This is nowhere more apparent than in relation to the central theme of Jesus' teaching with which Mark, programmatically, begins his account of Jesus' mission. In Mark 1:14-15 we read:

Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news!"

To the extent that the disciples ask anything at all about the coming reign of God, they seem to at least have got it that this was a central tenet of what Jesus was on about. Yet it's as if the disciples just can't *hear* what Jesus is saying quite plainly. Somehow it's lost in translation.

Parables of the Kingdom pepper the gospel in between *enacted* parables of healing and deliverance which demonstrate what the Kingdom is like. Yet nowhere in the gospel do we hear the disciples saying, "tell us what the Kingdom God is like!" Rather, both here and elsewhere⁵ they ask something quite different: "What's in it for me?"

There is a contemporary resonance to this. When the disciples demand, "Teacher, we want you to do for us *whatever* we ask of you",⁶ they could just as well be speaking the thoughts of any browser of the "self-help" section at the airport bookshop: "How is this going to enhance my life? Will this make me healthier or wealthier, more in touch with myself? "What's in it for me?..."

³ Mark 4:9.

⁴ Mark 7:14.

⁵ Mark 9:33-37.

⁶ Mark 10:35.

Religion as consumerism, the satisfaction of felt desire, is clearly evident in contemporary koreo around “spirituality” as opposed to “organised religion”. Whereas religions such as Judaism and Christianity make ethical demands beyond those of the adherent – demands even counter to their felt needs – “spirituality” is all about me and what *I* want.

Sadly, the disciples’ attitude is to be seen in much popular Christian thinking as well – even about worship. As good consumers we judge church by what we like and don’t like. Depending on our predilections and personalities, politics and class of origin, worship becomes part of the contemporary “culture wars”⁷ and is judged accordingly. Worship is “good” (qool) when we hear and experience what we want. It is “bad” (or worse still, *boring*), when we don’t.

...

“Teacher, we want you to do for us *whatever* we ask of you”. Jesus’ response is surprisingly gracious, starting, as he does from their felt need: “What is that you *want* me to do for you?” he asks.⁸

The disciples’ reply is remarkably crude. They say (if I may paraphrase): “Give us power and authority. Restore Israel, bring back the glory days and put us at the centre”.⁹ What is this if not a succinct summary of much contemporary church growth theory focussed, as it is, on survival and self-interest.

Yet again, Jesus replies ever so graciously: “Do you *really* know *what* you want? Are you *really* able to be *submersed* in what I am going through?”

“Yes”, they say, “we’re able”. “OK”, says Jesus knowingly, “you can have what you want – but it won’t be what you expect...”

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_war

⁸ Mark 10:36.

⁹ I am not addressing here the eschatological background to this discussion – the coming of the Son of Man and the sharing of the Holy Ones (of Israel) in this. Undoubtedly this is the background to this passage (see Daniel 7:13-14 *c.f.* 7:18,21-22 where there is an expectation that the Holy Ones will share in the glory of the coming dominion of the Son of Man). Given Jesus’ use of the term in relation to himself (Mk.9:9-12, 30-31; 10:32-34), the disciples’, albeit confused, expectations are understandable, even if they are presumptuous in their correlation of the Holy Ones with themselves. Rather, here I’ve majored on the self-serving theme which emerges especially over these chapter – see Mk.9:30-34, 38; 10 as well as our lectionary verses.

At this point, Jesus' disclaimer that "it's not for me to grant but it is for those for whom has been prepared", is ignored – and along with it his subtle pointer to both his origin and relationship with his Father.¹⁰

Instead the rest of the disciples get angry that they're being left out and a furory ensues. It's about *entitlement* – another contemporary resonance that goes hand in hand with the consumerist ethic. "If they can have what they want, why can't we?" or as Peter put it just before of this encounter "*We've left everything to follow you!*"¹¹ "We're not like the rest, we've *paid*, we're *entitled*".

Jesus' reply is as radical as it is unexpected. The narrative says he "*called them*", and this is what he called them to:

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.

But it is *not* so among you; whoever wishes to become great among you must be your *servant*, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be *slave* of all.

For the Son of Man came not to be served but to *serve*, and to *give* his life a *ransom* for many.

Peter, as much as John and James,¹² must have felt the sting of Jesus' rebuke. In critiquing the hated Gentile (read "*Roman*") culture and empire of his time – the very empire the disciples sort to throw off in the coming reign of God – Jesus is reiterating the message of the ancient prophets of Israel: "Don't be like them. Be different! Be distinctive! Don't give into how *they* do things and what *they* desire. Be the people of God!"

Each evening I troll both national and international news and current affairs sites on the net to review what the day has brought us. It doesn't

¹⁰ See Mark 8:38.

¹¹ Mark 10:28.

¹² See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Eerdmans, 2008; Ch. 1,2&7 (and throughout), where Bauckham argues for the eyewitness source of Mark's Gospel being Peter.

make easy reading – I won't elaborate on this but you all know what I'm talking about here.

Against this backdrop, as I look at the wider church, marked as it is, by a shrill fundamentalism on the one hand, confusion, and smug laxity on the other, I can't help but wonder what sort of fish we need in our ear to hear what Jesus is saying...

The words of our Lord are clear: if we really want to discern and be part of what God is doing in our midst then we need to get *this*: it is *service* and *sacrifice*, not privilege, power and self-satisfaction, that are at the core of Jesus' Kingdom because they are at the core of who he is as its King.