

Whomever wants to be first (Mark 9: 30-37)

St. Paul's, Milford

20 September 2015: 8:00 and 9:30

This week Jesus uses a little child to teach a lesson. Nothing else had worked. The passage starts on a very sombre note. Last week you may recall that I suggested that Mark's Gospel could be divided into two fairly equal parts. Divided by Peter's words, *You are the Messiah*. The first time that sort of statement had been uttered. And from that point the character of the Gospel changes – we see ahead of us the cross. Jesus clarifies things and makes it clear that *If you want to be my disciple then take up your cross and follow me*.

Sadly, it seems, they didn't get it.

Here we have them arguing amongst themselves: who's the greatest, the most important. In fact, a little later they were pretty embarrassed about it. They were reluctant to tell Jesus what they'd been arguing about. I wonder how the disciples felt when Jesus corrected them. We're given one clue in response to Jesus asking: *What were you arguing about?* We're simply told that *they were silent*. They were embarrassed; they were ashamed. Actually, we're not given the whole story here. We need to turn to the next chapter for that. James and John asked for a special favour from Jesus. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you". "What is it?" asked Jesus. "Well, we want to have two thrones, one on each side of you; one for me and one for my brother." Jesus' response was essentially. "You've got no idea what you're on about. You've got it all wrong." And of course the other disciples were pretty mad when they heard about it. Who do they think they are? In fact, the whole

thing is so embarrassing that when Matthew tells the story he has the mother of the two asking the question, not the disciples. Mum sticking up for her boys. On this occasion Jesus simply says: *Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.* A teaching very closely related to that of last week: *If you want to be my disciple then take up your cross and follow me.*

What we have here is the substance of what we now refer to as Servant Leadership. A concept now valued in the world of business. The best leaders are those who serve. Who take an interest in their staff, share their vision with them, invite suggestions from them; in other words treat them as human beings, as partners in the enterprise.

Jesus himself is our model. He came not to be served, but to serve.

He emptied himself and took the form of a servant.

He took the towel and washed his disciples' feet.

God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

In the *Magnificat* the mighty are knocked off their thrones, the proud are scattered in their conceit, the rich are sent away empty and the hungry are filled with good things.

Jesus lowered himself and took on our lowly nature so that he might raise us up and clothe us in his divine nature. If we want to be filled with God's life and power then we need to empty ourselves of everything that stands in the way — pride, self-seeking glory, vanity, etc.

The challenge to us is this: Are we ready to humble ourselves and to serve as Jesus did?

Or are we like the disciples? Do we compare ourselves with others and desire their praise? I think we all share this appetite for glory and greatness. Don't we all want to be a 'somebody' rather than a 'nobody'?

In fact, God gave us a quite special place in the scheme of things. The psalms speak about the glory God has destined for us. *You have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honour.*

I think it's helpful to think of the kingdom of God not so much – or not only - as a place we go to when we die, although it's that as well. But the kingdom of God is a way of life, something here and now. What our world would be like if God were in charge. In anticipation of that day it's how followers of Jesus are to live now on their way through life.

The kingdom of God is not organised as a hierarchy, as the disciples thought. There's no pecking order, no leader-board. True leadership is exercised through being a 'servant of all'.

Now Jesus is not against 'greatness', *per se*, but he insists that greatness be understood in a radically different way.

Not in power or wealth, but in service and care for the vulnerable. Greatness is a matter of character, orientation and breadth of interest. The great woman or

man truly cares for others and embodies that care in their everyday life. No one is beyond our care.

For Jesus, an anonymous person cleaning the office is greater than Julius Caesar.

And in this passage Jesus makes a dramatic gesture. He embraces a child to show his disciples who really is the greatest in the kingdom of God. Look at this little person here to see what I mean.

What can a little child possibly teach us about greatness?

Children in the ancient world had no rights, no position and no privileges of their own. Socially they were at the 'bottom of the rung'; at the service of their parents, much like the household staff and domestic servants. In Jesus' culture children were not idealised. Children were cared for by women, who were also second-class citizens. Both were regarded as property. I read that infant mortality in the first century was very high, as much as 30%. Another 30% would die in childhood. They had no rights; had no voice. No-one would defer to them for anything of importance.

What's the significance of Jesus' gesture? Jesus elevates a little child in front of his disciples by placing the child in a privileged position of honour. Note those words – I hadn't noticed them before. Jesus took a little child and 'put him among them'. Equal to them. And then he took the child in his arms and said those words we all know:

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but the one who sent me.

That's a powerful statement.

Who is the greatest in God's kingdom?

The one who is humble and lowly of heart — who, instead of asserting their rights, willingly empties himself of pride and self-seeking by taking the lowly position of a servant or a child.

Jesus teaches us that it's how we treat this person of no consequence that will reveal whether or not we have welcomed him (Jesus).

It will reveal whether or not we have encountered God. On the cross he will become a person despised and rejected.

It will show that we recognise God because we have learned to recognise him in the least important members of society, in a refugee perhaps.

In other words, receiving a child (as though he or she were Jesus) lays upon us the duty to be open to all the lowly and rejected. In Jewish practice the envoy or representative of someone had to be treated as if he were that very person.

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but the one who sent me.