

Mark 9:30-37

Jeremiah 11:18-20; James 3:13-4:3,7-8a

I wonder what we consider to be the mark of true greatness? We might think of a great political leader who has the ability to lead a country effectively through difficult times, like Churchill did during the Second World War. We might think of the Queen and her many years of loyal service as our country's longest reigning monarch. Alternatively, we might think of someone with great entrepreneurial flair, who heads up a multi-national company and leads it from strength to strength. Or we might see greatness in someone with great artistic talent – whether in music, fine art, acting, dancing.....

There are many different ways in which the mark of greatness can be seen. But specifically as *Christian believers*, what is it, above all else, that constitutes true greatness? Well, in our Gospel reading this morning the Lord makes it very clear what this must be.

Now the Lord's teaching on this matter comes in the context of a squabble amongst the disciples as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. Picture the scene: the disciples were strung out in a line walking behind Jesus, just as followers of Rabbis did at the time. As they walked along, it seems they were arguing up and down the line, and no doubt some angry words were reaching the ears of the Lord Jesus as he walked in front of them. But rather than rebuking his disciples straight away, in public, he waited until they were in the house to do so.

Now all this squabbling about greatness reflected a very *worldly* way of thinking amongst the disciples. And the irony of it all, is that Jesus had just told them all about what was going to happen to *him* - "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." He was to be a very different kind of Messiah to what they had no doubt been expecting. Their argument about 'who's the

greatest' seems to demonstrate that they hadn't quite grasped what Jesus' mission was really about. It's no wonder that Mark notes that Jesus' followers "did not understand what he was saying..." Because Jesus came, *not* as a great political and military leader (as so many had been expecting of the Messiah), but as the 'Suffering Servant' - he came *not* to *be* served but *to* serve - ultimately laying down his life as a sacrifice for sin. As the apostle Paul was later to put it in his Letter to the Philippians, Christ "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.....he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross." *Servanthood* is the whole key to Jesus' earthly life. Jesus stands worldly human values on their head. In fact, the Greek word we translate as 'servant' here is 'διακονος' – it's the word from which we get the term 'deacon' – someone who is ordained to a ministry of service, and who, through that ministry, reminds *all* Christians of their calling to serve.

So, the fundamental principle which the Lord declares here is that, if we desire *spiritual* greatness, then what we must truly desire is to serve others – deliberately choosing the lowliest and most humble place. If the way of Christ is the way of service, then it must also be the way of those who sincerely want to *follow* him. *True greatness* is, first and foremost, about putting others before oneself - showing ourselves to be outstanding in the role of *servant*.

And the Lord illustrates this by placing a little child in the midst of them. In 1st century society, children were assigned a very lowly place – they basically were to be seen and not heard. Today we tend to hold children in higher esteem, though perhaps we still need to be humble enough to admit that we do have much to learn from them. Yet Jesus declares that whoever welcomes a child in his name, welcomes both him and the One who sent him. Jesus, God Incarnate, came to us in great humility - walking the lowly road of being last - as a servant, as a

child. So, as his disciples, *this* is the standard by which *our* lives are to be measured. The way of the Kingdom of God is humility.

It's all deeply counter-cultural, of course; it represents a complete reversal of our previous scale of values. The prevailing attitude of society is one which places a great deal of emphasis upon status and self-assertion. A whole multi-million-pound industry has developed in this country which aims to help individuals and those working in big business to become more aggressive in one's approach to others – to think highly of oneself. By contrast, *Christ's* Kingdom is characterised by *service*. And following Christ means being of the same mind as Christ. So, whatever our earthly position in life, we're not to 'lord it over' others, but rather our calling is to *be* servants – to imitate *Christ's* humility.

Sadly, the Church, as the agent of God's Kingdom in the world, has all too often forgotten this, and instead has sought *earthly*

wealth and dominance. We even tend to see ordination in hierarchical terms – we talk, for instance, of being 'elevated' to a bishop and bishops being 'enthroned', whereas it's really meant to be about being the servant of the servants of the servants. As a child I used to hold ordained ministers in great awe – the 'Reverend' was placed on a pinnacle; but when I became one myself, all that thankfully disappeared rather rapidly.

Our reading from the Letter of James in some way illuminates the contrast between the attitude of the disciples and the way of Christ. Here the author talks of two types of wisdom. On the one hand, there's so-called 'wisdom' which is earthly, unspiritual and devilish, which leads to bitter envy, selfish ambition, disorder and wickedness. These are precisely the kind of things the disciples' obsession with 'who is the greatest' gives rise to. But on the other hand, there is the godly, Christ-like wisdom, which is gentle, pure, peaceable, willing to yield, full of

mercy and good fruits, and which shows no partiality or hypocrisy. It reflects a humble, servant heart.

Now how all of this works out in practice is going to be unique to each of us, depending on our particular situation in life. But whatever our particular circumstances, this *isn't* about being a 'doormat' – allowing people to simply 'walk all over you', as it were. The prophet Jeremiah certainly knew how this felt. In our Old Testament reading Jeremiah is humbly going about his call to proclaim God's word to his people; but here we find that he was being oppressed for prophesying to them a message which they simply didn't want to hear. They even wanted to destroy Jeremiah, but he seeks vindication from God.

But neither is Christian humility about being 'ever so 'umble', in the sense of the famous character of Uriah Heep in Dickens' novel, which is actually a false humility covering up a rather

darker side. Rather, true humility is *not* something which comes about *naturally*, but rather something which has a *supernatural* origin – it is a work of the Holy Spirit within us.

A little while ago, I was at a church in the City of London, sitting amongst a large gathering of mostly committed Christians, at a lunchtime service. For them, being a servant to others and displaying humility in the midst of their daily work in the big banks and financial institutions of the Square Mile, is certainly very challenging. After all, in *that* context, the name of the game is to get one over the other, in the hope that you'll grab the money before someone else does – competing with one another is the norm. In such an environment, having a servant heart is seen as weakness. And yet, even in *that* tough situation, a quiet revolution is happening as believers seek to demonstrate Christ-like humility – that virtue which turns the assumptions of the world upside down – in their places of work. It's something which comes from

walking closely with Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And the same can be true for *us* in our *own*, very different, context. We too can be a transforming presence in this way, in the situations in which *we* find ourselves. Indeed, there are so many opportunities which present themselves in *our* daily lives where we can demonstrate that loving service to others, underpinned by humility. In fact, the way of service and humility is so counter-cultural, that when people see these characteristics displayed in our lives, it will often cause them to think about why it is we are like that, thus leading them to discover Christ for themselves.

So as believers, *this* is what ought to be the mark of *true* greatness for *us*. May it always be our desire to follow in the way of Christ's eternal Kingdom, the way of humility and service, just as Our Lord came among us as one who serves.

Let us pray:

Holy God as you have called us to serve you, guide us and make us worthy of our calling. Give us wisdom to use our talents and resources to your glory and for the benefit of all who are in need; in Jesus' name. Amen.