

The Greatest

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Mark 9: 30 - 37

James 3:13 - 4:3, 7-8a

Who is the greatest?

The famed pugilist Mohamed Ali had a quick reply to that.

So do a lot of other people.

There is more than one President who we recognise has a personal sense of inflamed ego – as well as Prime Ministers, sports people, and pop stars.

And at times, in these very public efforts to be ‘great’, we can see a clambering desperation.

It’s this same clambering desperation evident in the behaviour of Jesus’ disciples in the Gospel reading.

If we are honest, many of us, can go the wrong way about building our self-image.
We try to build ourselves up by making ourselves superior to others.

Ever found yourself listening to the news about a corporate worker who has defrauded money,
or a sports star caught taking drugs,
or a politician stripped of ministerial responsibilities because she pushed things too far...
and feeling superior to them?

Maybe, we snigger to ourselves and think:
“Well, I may not as smart, as fast, or as powerful as them – but I’d never condescend to that level!”

I actually feel better hearing the sordid details of other people broadcast publically.
If that is about me feeling better about myself, what kind of basis for my sense of self is that?

Jesus tells us today that whoever wants to be first must be last of all, and servant of all.

Do these words shock us?
For some of us they may be so familiar they have lost the confronting power they first had...
...even though our own lives hardly ever match-up with what Jesus is saying!

When Jesus talks about the first becoming last of all, do we roll our eyes and pay little attention?

Yet, do we really know what this phrase means when Jesus talks about the last of all becoming the first?

And do we really believe it, in spite of the fact that there is so much evidence in the world to show us otherwise?

I mean really... who are the first?
Who are the last?

Is Jesus talking about *economics*, and the first are the wealthy while the last are the poorest?

Is Jesus talking about *fame*?

Is Jesus talking about *power*?

Is it about spiritual *righteousness*, (like he challenged the Pharisees of his day)?

I'm not sure we know who "the first" really are.

Or "the last," for that matter.

We might assume that we know, but if we really think about it, all we have is an assumption, and that's not the same as an explanation.

Perhaps the truth is that we aren't supposed to think about being first or last at all.

Maybe the point of this teaching isn't to get us thinking about the words *first* and *last*, but instead to get us to set our assessments of ourselves and others aside and focus on welcoming and serving all, as Jesus welcomed and served all.

There is a wondrous sanity in Jesus which far outreaches all the so called wisdom of the world.

While he was trying to cope with the certainty of his arrest, desolation and agonising death, His disciples were stupidly intent on self-validation; they were arguing about which of them was the greatest.

Jesus was facing death but it was the disciples who were really on a path that was doomed.

Only God is sufficient to authenticate the value of our lives.

Jesus teaches that whoever wants to be first must be last of all, and servant of all.

Jesus lived and breathed the message that God loves us and values us as priceless, and that this is the only sure ground of peace and purpose.

Don't trust yourself, don't trust the opinions of others, just trust God.

Do that and a secure realisation of your true worth will come to you as sheer gift.

Let go. Let God.

Jesus took a small child and stood him among the quarrelling disciples, a humble little figure. He maybe sat the child on his knee, as an example of those who have no status yet have everything.

There may be a double meaning here. In the early church new converts were called 'little children'. The new converts brought nothing except their readiness to trust the grace of God in Christ Jesus. They disowned all else and started afresh.

The early believers saw conversion and baptism as a dying to the old self and a rising to the new self. It was a helpful insight and practice.

John's Gospel expresses it in another way when he says that those who truly believe have already crossed over from death to life.

Will you each ask yourself again this day:

“Am I caught up in the futile practice of trying to be ‘great’ through my own efforts?

Am I attempting to build up my self-worth by competing with, or looking down on, others?”

All efforts at greatness, no matter how outwardly successful they may appear, are but a thin facade. Behind the facade clambering desperation gnaws away, and sooner or later the facade will collapse.

There is only one solid ground of authentic self-worth,
only one rock which nothing can erode: God.

God secures our value.

God names the price, once and for all, paid in blood.

You are very special; invaluable in God’s eyes.

As is often the case, what we hear in the Word of God today from Jesus functions both as law and as gospel.

It is law in that Christ is literally, directly calling us to be servants.

He is stating clearly – set aside your assessments of yourselves and others, and stop trying to get ahead. Worry about being a servant instead, not for the sake of having favour with the powerful, but simply for the sake of serving other people. *All* other people.

Yet this word at the same time is gospel (good news), because what Christ asks of us, he has already done for us in even greater measure.

When we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

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

Christ came for the first and the last, and everyone in between, and it is truly good news that we can give up that clambering desperation to be the greatest and just be at peace, as servants, together with a God who became a servant for us.

As I finish this sermon, let me ask you to picture in your mind the child that Jesus placed on his knee amidst his self-important disciples.

See Jesus pick that child up.

Imagine once again (or maybe for the first time) that you are that little child sitting on Christ’s knee.

Know that he accepts and values and loves you.

On Christ’s knee you are infinitely greater than Governors General, or Nobel Prize winners, greater than Prime Ministers, Popes and Presidents.

Become the least, and you will become the first.

Amen.