

WHO IS THE GREATEST?

Mark 9:33-37 [MW18-30]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai & Wellsford, Sunday 23 September 2018

Imagine a dry dusty road

- overhead a blazing blue sky with wispy cloud as far as the eye can see
open country to either side
- the Master walking on ahead
a group of disciples following behind at a distance, talking heatedly

Ah yes, but who was it went up the mountain with him – me!

- well he took me when he raised that girl from the dead
- you guys were only there watching; have any of you actually forced a demon out of a person? I don't think so! But I have, and he commended me!
- that's nothing I could do that easy
- who is the one he always sits next to then, eh?
- do I need to remind you who he chose to be the foundation
- hah! Then you mucked up
- yeah!
- you're not his favourite though
- and who did he trust the money too ...

And so the animated argument goes on

- so much so that they don't notice the heat
their growing thirst or the passing distance
- when they finally arrive at the house which is their destination, the Master asks them:
what were you talking about so loudly and energetically back there on the road?

Imagine the disciples looking at one another

- trying not to have sheepish expressions on their faces
and silence ... absolute silence
- they knew, they knew he knew
they knew that was something they should not even have been thinking about
let alone arguing about

Yet in today's world 'hiding your light under a bushel' is not seen as a viable option

- you have to get out there and market, market, market
push, push, push
- you have to put yourself forward
say as well as show just how good you are
- there is that saying about "blowing your own trumpet" isn't there?
something like: 'toot your own horn and the notes will be flat'
- and yet these days if you don't blow your own trumpet
no one will blow it for you
- in fact if you don't use it someone will probably steal it!

It's an attitude that can creep unknowingly, unwittingly, into the church too

- on more than on occasion I have been part of a group responsible for selecting the candidates for an important Diocesan committee
- some of the others in the group have said things like the candidates should have written more about themselves
- in a sense 'tooted their own horn' and they fact that they hadn't seemed to count against them
- but often we are not used to putting ourselves forward not good at highlighting our achievements and attributes feel uncomfortable about saying: "Pick me! Pick me! Pick me!"
- particularly in church situations

I think that's a good thing

- I think it's good to be uncomfortable about that I think that we are to carry on doing what we're supposed to be doing trusting that our gifts, our talents, our abilities will be recognised and confirmed by others ...

Yeah right! Nice theory

- but it won't work in today's world if someone does that they'll be climbed over, have their ideas stolen be pushed to the back and out the window
- who is the greatest? not necessarily the best person for the job but the one with the best PR and the loudest campaign?

It's comforting, and disturbing, to know that some things

- are the same in the 21st century as they were in the 1st century! what did Jesus say: *If you want the place of honour, you must become a slave and serve others!*
- yeah right! that's the way to greatness!

Some translations use the word "servant" but the word really means "slave"

- a slave in Jesus time was housed and fed but their life was not their own they existed solely to do the will of others
- Jesus was, as usual, turning things on their head he redefined, recreated, "ambition"

Bible scholar William Barclay writes:

For the ambition to rule [Jesus] substituted the ambition to serve. For the ambition to have things done for us he substituted the ambition to do things for others

Perhaps even the great statesman, President John F. Kennedy, was inspired by this when he said:

Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country

The world says "the greatest" is the one out in front, on top, tended to by others

- Jesus says it's not that way at all

There is a common sense element in this

- if someone is worried about how well they're doing, wondering if they're the best if there is someone else doing better they probably won't do things as well as they could
- it's a bit like that saying from "zen archery" which is about learning to let the arrow fire itself
- greatness comes when a person is immersed in serving and following

Barclay also highlights the practical value of this when he comments:

The divisions and disputes which tear the church asunder would for the most part never occur if the only desire of its office bearers and members was to serve it without caring what position they occupied.

Imagine now if you will a group of people waiting in a large foyer

- how many kids did you say are in your youth group?
- our Vicar is on the Bishop's think tank and General Synod and ...
- well our Pastor has been invited to be keynote speaker at the National Convention
- we have fifteen home study groups
- last year we baptised 27 adults
- we've just put a new audio-visual system in our church
- our minister is invited to take part in all civic functions
- we have hundreds come to our Christ in Christmas display
- our foodbank helps at least fifteen families a week

What was Jesus response?

Then he put a little child among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "Anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes my Father who sent me."

This action with a child was shocking

- in fact we probably can't even begin to appreciate just how outrageous it was
- these days we think children are very important in our country they have their own National Commissioner
- our Diocese has a dedicated Children's Ministry staff person

But, but, in Jesus' day a child would not even be noticed enough to be ignored

- children were not 'seen and not heard' children were simply not seen, they were invisible
- they just didn't count

In fact that child should not have been anywhere near a master and his disciples

- which once again highlights how different Jesus was there were probably women and children part of the group not just hanging around the fringes but accepted
- more of the world being turned upside down

Then Jesus says this child is like him, stands in for him

- *if you welcome this child, you welcome me*
you could have heard a pin drop
if it were not for the sound of jaws dropping on the floor

The disciples had been arguing about which one of them was “the greatest”

- which one of them would best represent Jesus
and Jesus says a child best represents him!
- a child is the greatest
it just doesn't make sense ...

The whole idea of greatness is shot to smithereens

- greatness seems to encompass being last, serving others, welcoming children

So for “homework” this coming week, reflect on Jesus' definition of “greatness”, and perhaps even come up with your own one line statement about greatness, based on this

- I invite you to notice this week, in your conversations with people
in news items, TV programmes, movies, songs
how “greatness” is measured – what makes people consider others great
- and contrast this with what you have learnt from this morning's gospel
if you are brave enough, or cheeky enough, you might even throw in your line
about “greatness” to make people think
- and look for examples of people who are “great” according to Jesus' definition
servant leaders, people serving their community

To conclude I invite you to imagine, this might take a bit more effort, a group of angels looking out over things happening on earth ...

- look there, that man goes off to work before dawn every day to a job he hates
to provide food for his family
- what about that secretary, she writes reports she never gets credit for and is not bitter
- how about that one whose family was killed in the civil war
and yet works tirelessly for reconciliation of their nation
- see there, that elderly woman, housebound, faithfully praying for others
- that teacher with an unruly class who don't want to learn, he never gives up on them
- and that woman who bakes and cooks for others in her street
- alright then, how about that child who says she believes in God and is made fun of
but still tries to be friends with everyone
- or that one, who has been really hurt, but is still forgiving and cheerful
- you have to notice the man who left a secure professorship
to help people in that famine area grow better crops ...

Which of these is the greatest?

- a voice answers from the throne of grace:
they are all the greatest
for they all reflect the light and life
which came into the world in my Son