**Who is the Greatest – Mark 9:33-37 (10th March 2024)**

We heard from the Gospel reading about Jesus’ teaching described in the gospel of Mark, in chapter 9, verses 33-37. This passage is focussed on arguments and discussions about who’s the greatest in the church community.

These verses in Mark’s Gospel are part of a larger section of teaching – Jesus is teaching His disciples about living life after His death and resurrection. Jesus is preparing the disciples for the time when he has left them on Earth.

Let’s look together at this story from the ninth chapter of Mark’s Gospel.

Jesus had been traveling with His disciples through Galilee—heading southward to the city of Capernaum, a fishing village of about 1,500 people on the Sea of Galilee. As they travelled along, Jesus was telling His disciples about how He would soon be going to Jerusalem; and of how He would be handed over to men for trial, would be crucified, and would then be raised from the dead three days later.

The passage begins with their having arrived at the city of Capernaum.

Mark tells us;

*Jesus asked the Disciples “What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?” But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest. And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.”*

*Then He took a little child and set him in the middle of them. And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in My name welcomes Me; and whoever welcomes Me does not welcome Me but the one who sent Me”.*

Wrapped up in this story is an important lesson about ‘greatness’. It’s one that challenges just about every other concept of greatness that has applied in the history of humankind.

Let’s just look at those verses again.

v. 33 – *They came to Capernaum, and when Jesus was in the house He asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way ?”*

Jesus asks His disciples what had they been arguing about earlier as they travelled along their journey.

v. 34 – *“But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest“.* They were silent probably because they knew better than to openly discuss and argue about such a thing – maybe they were embarrassed.

Jesus has been teaching them about the coming of the kingdom of God and, perhaps, understandably, they expected to have a key, ‘high-up’ place in that kingdom, based on their service to Jesus.

And that expectation was understandable - as Jesus indicates in Matthew 19:28 – “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits ? on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

But what had the Disciples been discussing and disputing amongst each other?

Maybe it was which one of them should have the highest or best place in the Kingdom of God. Who would have the best throne, be positioned the nearest or furthest from Jesus?

v. 35 – *“Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.’”*

Jesus teaches them about the true path to greatness – which is very different than what most people in the world think.

***The way to be great is to be “last of all and servant of all.”*** – to be humble and to serve.

Here in Mark 9, Jesus says that the way to greatness is the way of humility and service. And if we want to be great, we need to be the greatest servants. And of course this isn’t simply something Jesus says, this is the way He lived. The life and the death of Jesus are the ultimate demonstrations of the greatness of humility and service.

If in the world you become great by putting yourself forward to be recognized, scrabbling your way to the top while pushing others down, being arrogant and self-focused – in God’s kingdom you become great by showing humility - lowering yourself and being the last of all.

If being great in the world means being served by others – in God’s kingdom being great means serving others.

Jesus is saying to his disciples – it’s OK to seek to be great, but you’re going about it in exactly the wrong way.

* Don’t focus on raising yourself up and being recognized and served.
* Focus on lowering yourself and serving others’ needs.

For this is what greatness means in the kingdom of God.

And then Jesus gives an illustration of what this means in practice.

*v. 36 – “He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in His arms…...”*.

Remember that in biblical times children were not held in the same high regard as they are today in the West. They had no power or social status. They were not put on a pedestal. They were ‘lowly and last’.

And so what does Jesus do? He takes the small child in His arms and He hugs them. A simple act of love; the giving of attention and affection. Jesus is saying, “This is what I’m talking about.”

Then he gives the lesson. vs. 36-37 – *“. . . he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one of these little children in My name welcomes Me; and whoever welcomes Me does not welcome Me but the one who sent Me.’”*

To welcome them in the name of Jesus is to do this on behalf of Jesus; as his representative; as his servant.

Jesus is saying that ***greatness comes from being humble, accepting the lowest social status, in order to serve others*** – in this case a child. Instead of expecting others to focus on you and lifting you up, you focus on them and lift them up by serving them, loving them, and administering to their needs.

And in doing so, you will be serving Jesus and indeed the Father

This lesson is so relevant today. Everywhere you look, we can see examples of people vying for the right to have positions of power and authority over others. We see it at national level with invasions, wars and conflicts, and we see it at individual level as people are willing to trample over others in order to climb up the ladder of worldly greatness.

While perhaps today we can see the foolishness in the disciples’ conversation about greatness, their discussions arose from their view of the world at the time. They believed Jesus was on His way to establishing His kingdom on earth and they had every reason to believe they were going to be leaders in that Kingdom – they expected and maybe even desired greatness.

Jesus teaches us a completely different way in this passage. It’s His *own* way—the way that He Himself followed—to achieve true greatness. He taught us that **true greatness is measured by how far we go to serve others and show humility in the way we live our lives and engage with others.**

I read recently the following passage:-

1. *It may not seem like much, but the way to greatness is not possible without...*
   1. *A servant heart and servant hand*
   2. *A humble heart and humble hand*
2. *Jesus proved the greatness of service and humility by His own example...*
   1. *Coming to this earth in the form of a servant*
   2. *Humbling Himself to the point of death on the cross*
   3. *Thereby being highly exalted by God*

On Mothering Sunday, when we think of and celebrate our mothers, we remember that two of the great qualities of motherhood are service and humility.

As we spoke about earlier, our Church should be a place of comfort, compassion, nurture and hope, a place which is Mother to its members and the surrounding community

A place of service and humility, with love at its core.

The question we should each ask ourselves is, am I living a life of service and humility, and love.

Am I helping our church be that place of warmth, comfort and love at the centre of our community?

If we can be like that, with God’s help and the Holy Spirit with us, supporting each other, our church can truly be a place where we love Jesus, and we love our neighbours, with all our heart, soul, mind and strength,

And a place that teaches other to do the same wholeheartedly,

And a place which is a Shining Light in our community – as it says in Philippians:

“Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life”