

“WHO IS THE GREATEST?” (Mark 9-30 to 39) - WHEATLEY 23/9/18

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“As we wrestle with the words of scripture, may our hearts and minds be open to your Word, Dear God, and may we receive your blessing with humble gratitude.”

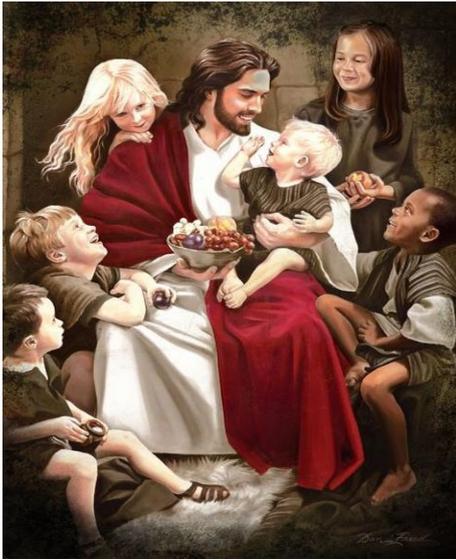
The famous heavyweight boxing champion, Muhammad Ali, was known for often bragging, “I’m the greatest.” Once on a flight to Los Angeles when the stewardess reminded him to fasten his seatbelt, Ali said to her: “Superman don’t need no seatbelt.” Quick as a flash, the stewardess retorted, “Superman don’t need no airplane, either.”

It is amazing how greatness seems to be as appealing to us nowadays as it was for the disciples 2000 years ago, even if we don’t necessarily agree to what constitutes greatness ... So, let’s have another look at what it might be ... In the world of the disciples, social interactions were the medium towards greatness, interactions which were infused with the strongest sense of honour and shame. Those who were rich and powerful and those who aspired to be, hoped to demonstrate their honour and their greatness by the company they kept. So, who you mixed with, was one of the main ways to greatness.

Our modern society is of course very different from the ancient one, but there are still similarities: Many seek status, not necessarily through the people we mix with ... although some do ... but most commonly through wealth, fame, titles, achievements of all sort, or even ... electronics: When the Apple Smart-Watch was released in September 2016, it was revealed that it came in aluminium, stainless-steel and gold versions!!!! Remember, this is a piece of kit that will be obsolete in 2 or 3 years, so the only conceivable need for a 10,000 pounds gold-version is status: to proclaim to the world that money can be spent with no correlation to value, just to show how wealthy you are, how great you are.

Of course, most of us here would not dream of buying a £10, 000 “iPhone” or “smart-watch”, but the question I want to put to you this morning is whether we still look for greatness in ways which are not the ways that Jesus commanded us? I am sure we all do, to some extent at least, because what Jesus is saying is that true greatness is not to be above others, but to be least of all and servant of all. ... Pretty strong stuff in a society where honour was the core virtue! And to illustrate his point, Jesus takes a child and put him in the very centre of the assembled disciples, in the centre of the conversation. Now, if like me, you have been fed with the notion of a Jesus, meek and mild, surrounded by adoring little children, preferably Aryan looking, you may have in your mind sugary pictures like these:

= SHOW PICTURES ON AV=



Well, interpreting the passage we heard today like that, a sort of “warm and fuzzy” experience and an occasion that Jesus used, to teach disciples about child-like humility and innocence, is almost certainly NOT the right interpretation because what Jesus was doing was in fact extraordinarily shocking and subversive. Why? Because our child-centred culture is a very recent development. For most of human history - and first century Palestine was no exception - children were among the least valued people in society and had no rights and a very low status. They were cared for by women, who were themselves second-class citizens, and both were regarded as property. Infant mortality rates commonly reached 30 percent while another 30 percent of live births were dead by age six. Children were always the ones who suffered first from famine, war, disease and dislocation. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, when asked who should be saved first in the event of a fire, answered: your parents first, then your spouse and finally your children.

Of course, children always represented the future: they would carry on the family name and honour, provide for their aging parents, and produce the next generation. But in the present, they were a liability. They participated in the household labour but

were not yet fully productive and therefore represented another mouth to feed. Children were not outcasts by any means, but they were non-persons. It does not mean that they were badly treated or not loved but they had no possible greatness and certainly, nothing to offer in terms of honour or status.

So, when Jesus takes a child as a model for greatness - one of the most insignificant person in that world - it was for the people of his time really absurd, totally counter-cultural and extremely difficult to understand: accepting that a child might have some value is, for the male disciples, inconceivable, and even an insult to their values. Therefore, when Jesus says: "welcome the child", he is not saying "love these cute little guys because they are so humble and pure, and you should be like them", he is saying "welcome the least valued among you, welcome the ones who are at bottom of the heap." And then, when in Matthew's version, Jesus says "become" like a child" he is not saying to his disciples to become child-like and humble, but he is telling them to be like himself who embraces them. It is Jesus, not the child, who is the model and who demonstrates what it means to be "the servant of all."

What Jesus is doing is overturning the prevailing assumptions about power and security by inviting the disciples to imagine that abundant life comes through service. In other words, true greatness, Jesus says, is caring for the welfare of others and especially the most vulnerable. It is the path of "doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God," it is our old friend, "the kingdom of God, the Rule of God here on earth" ... The kingdom of God is not so much a place we go when we die, although it might be that as well. The kingdom of God, the Rule of God is a way of life, something for the here and now. The kingdom of God is what our world would be like, if God were in charge. In anticipation of that day, it is how followers of Jesus are to live now, "on the way".

The disciples have a hierarchical understanding of the world but the Rule of God is not organized hierarchically because in what Martin Luther King called the Beloved Community, relationships are characterized by affirming the dignity of all, offering open table fellowship, promoting gender equality, practicing non-violent resistance to political and religious oppression, and being a "servant of ALL". So, for us nowadays, we may choose to live most of the year as if what matters is success or fame or power or wealth but what Jesus is reminding us is that when we stand before God, we are only great if we have taken care of the little people, the vulnerable, the voiceless and the no-status people.

And of course, Jesus throughout his ministry, did exactly this, associating with the last and the least in society – lepers, bleeding women, raging demoniacs, tax collectors and other notorious "sinners". For all of this, he is condemned as an outlaw and a blasphemer by the religious authorities, who decide that he is much too dangerous and must be eliminated. Let me emphasize here that Jesus does not die in order to buy back our sins, but because he declares the forgiveness of sins. Jesus dies because he associates with the impure and the worst of sinners. Jesus dies because the religious establishment cannot tolerate the Radical grace of God that he proclaims and lives. And that radical grace of God completely obliterates the world's notions of greatness based on status, wealth and achievement. Perhaps that is why we resist grace so much. It is much more appealing to be great on the world's terms than on Jesus' terms.

Now, in this passage we are also told that the disciples don't understand. The obtuseness of the disciples and their lack of understanding, that we see so often in

Mark's Gospel is sometimes downright comical, but Mark portrays them like that for a reason, especially here as he adds "and they were afraid to ask" Why is that? Why are they afraid to ask? Is it because they are afraid of Jesus or is it because they don't want to appear stupid? Neither of the two actually but because, according to Mark, they lack faith ...

Fear is ubiquitous in Mark and is always the paired opposite of faith. We see this in the calming of the storm when Jesus asks the disciples: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" or when he says to Jairus about his dead daughter: "Do not fear; just have faith." /// Faith in Mark is not intellectual assent to a series of ideas or articles to be believed, Faith is about TRUST while fear, its opposite, is our deep human resistance to the transformation to which we are called. So, when the disciples, and us of course, are afraid to ask questions about important things, something happens which is not good at all and we are going to have a look at what it is:

Mark loves using what I call "tricks", what experts call, (more accurately!) "literary devices" to make a theological point. His most well-known "trick" is called the "Markan sandwich" where he breaks a story by inserting a second unrelated one in the middle of it. He uses this trick 9 times in his short Gospel but the most famous is the cleansing of the temple inserted between the 2 bits of the fig-tree story. Here Mark uses another of his favourite tricks, something called juxtaposition: He places stories side by side without any transition, stories which apparently have no link whatsoever with each other, in order to make a theological point that could not have been achieved without such proximity. A well-known example of this, is the disciples' inability to recognize Jesus' identity after the calming of the storm, causing them to ask: "Who then is this?" which contrasts with the very next story, in which a demon knows Jesus' identity.

Here Mark uses this trick of juxtaposition by putting together first, the prediction by Jesus of his own passion about which the disciples don't ask any explanation because they are afraid with another one, their discussion regarding who is the greatest: clearly 2 different episodes, entirely unrelated, right? Well in fact, it is in their proximity that the meaning resides and the meaning is this: when the disciples side-step the real questions because they are afraid to ask, they turn to arguing with each other and squabble among themselves over petty issues of rank and status.

In other words, when they -AND WE- don't ask questions because we are afraid, we miss the real important things and we concentrate on things which are not important...Fear does that: It narrows our vision and drives us to look out only for ourselves

So fear in itself is not a big deal, it is a human reaction and we all experience it but it is how we respond to it that shows that we are ... or not ... "on the way": To the disciples who are afraid, Jesus says: Focus your attention elsewhere. Think of others and think of how you can serve them. Never mind if you are great or not great in the eyes of the world, just welcome a child, help a vulnerable person.

For us, the lesson is clear: Do not be afraid to ask questions: asking questions is absolutely fundamental to our faith because faith is not about certainty but about wondering, it is not about answers but about questions and it is in engaging in that dialogue that we become greater than we were.... But beware, dialogues are usually unpredictable: When we start asking questions, we may get answers that we do not want to hear or are not ready to hear... Once we start asking questions, there's no

going back which it is why it is easier to stay silent because if we remain silent, we don't have to negotiate change or navigate new levels of meaning that used to be comfortable and predictable. So, starting that dialogue is a movement forward and it takes courage ... But the courage to ask is DEFINITELY the real mark of discipleship.

And when fear comes and paralyses us, we need to remember that fear is not "conquered" but transformed by a conscious decision to trust in God, trust that God will help us to follow him because he understands the limits of our human vision and of our human wisdom.

Amen