

‘Who is the Greatest?’

Reading: Mark 9:30 – 37

“What were you arguing about on the road?” Jesus asks his disciples. “What were you arguing about?” And the way Jesus asks this question and makes the point of bringing it up as they are gathered together for their evening meal, suggests to me that something of a very heated and tense exchange had been going on amongst the disciples as they had been walking along the road together earlier in the day.

And so let’s go back a bit, Jesus and his disciples have been up in the very north of Israel around the area of Mount Hermon. And Jesus has taken the disciples up there so that he can escape from the crowds and get some space to give them some intensive teaching. And there’s a real sense of urgency about it as he’s preparing them for the days that lie ahead. Jesus knows the time for the fulfilment of why he came has now arrived and that they will soon be setting out for Jerusalem - a journey he knows will ultimately lead to the cross.

And so as they are out on the road and making their way back to Capernaum they are probably walking along in some kind of file with the disciples strung out in in groups of twos and threes behind Jesus who is obviously out in front and leading the way. And as they are walking along he overhears all this bickering going on behind him, and raised voices. And so when they get to the house where they are heading and have settled down he asks them: “What were you arguing about on the road?”

Oh dear! They didn’t dare tell him as they’re like little kids having been found out doing something wrong. And there’s dead silence - nobody says a word. And it’s because they’re ashamed and embarrassed as they had been arguing about who amongst them was the greatest who was the most important – it’s all very childish.

And it doesn’t take much to imagine the sort of conversations that might have been going on along the road. Peter, James and John, having been up on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus not all that long before may have been saying something to the others along the lines of: “Well - that sort of puts us three on a higher level than the rest of you.” And then maybe there was some form of jealousy amongst the others and they were saying things like. “Why should they have been singled out?” “Why wasn’t I chosen -they are no more qualified than I am.” “What about me -why have I been left out?” It all sounds very familiar doesn’t it?

And as Jesus confronts them with their own selfish motives and feelings - they are embarrassed and ashamed. And are there times when we’ve been there I wonder? We’ve said something hurtful or inappropriate and we suddenly remember the presence of Jesus in our lives and we feel ashamed and embarrassed in the light of his presence.

And so as we have seen, Jesus has been taking some time out to teach his disciples as he is acutely aware that time is running out and that he will soon have to face all the horrors of the cross. He speaks to them of his impending death, and how he will be handed over to people who are going to kill him and how after three days he will rise again but somehow or other they’re just not getting the message. It just isn’t going in.

And in some ways you can see why it was difficult for them as what Jesus was saying seemed at odds with what they had been led to believe the Messiah would do when he came. They had been brought up on the understanding that the Messiah when he came would be a warrior king – not one who came to die – that’s not what Messiah’s do - is it!

And we can be like that at times. God is trying to say something to us and it doesn't seem to fit with our preconceived ideas of how we think things should be. But then there's a sense in which Jesus seems to turn everything upside down.

And the disciples' failure to understand, and hesitancy to ask, only serves to underline the loneliness Jesus must have felt as he faced the cross. I don't think it was because Jesus was unapproachable on the subject, but the disciples probably did not want to know too many details of what was coming – the prospect of Jesus dying was too painful.

Yet it still remains that Jesus is telling them: "I am about to die" and all they can think about is themselves. After all he had been trying to teach them you'd think they would be taken up by all he is about to go through but all they can think about is their own personal status and importance. Maybe the issue was about, who was going to get the top jobs in the Kingdom they still seemed to think Jesus was going to declare in Jerusalem despite everything he had been saying to them.

And although they have been with Jesus for quite some time they still do not really grasp and understand what his mission is all about – they'll understand later, of course, after the resurrection but at this time just don't seem to get it. They can't see that the Kingdom is not about status, self-importance and power politics and things like that – its values are entirely different.

One commentator says this: 'Christ cannot do anything with people until they have stopped discussing their own importance; pride is one of the most difficult things to deal with.'

And so how does Jesus respond to all this bickering and arguing. Well once they are settled down in the house and about to have their evening meal, he raises the issue with them and asks what they had been arguing about on the road. And, of course, he knows full well what they had been arguing about. And as we have already seen the disciples don't say a thing because they are too ashamed.

And Jesus calls a little child over who's been running around. And the little boy comes running to him and stands there amongst all these grown up disciples some of them big burly fishermen. And Jesus then takes the little boy in his arms and says: "Look; now take a look at this child and see what's important in my eyes. Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me."

And the whole point of the small child is that the child has nothing to offer. Unlike today a child in those days had no status. There was nothing a little child could bring to the table. Welcoming and serving a little child would bring you neither recognition nor reward, yet Jesus says: "Whoever welcomes a small child in my name welcomes me." So Jesus takes this little child as a symbol of the poor, the marginalised and all those he had come to serve; - those with no status and uses him as an example of what it means to be part of his Kingdom.

And so often in our own day, just as then, it seems greatness is measured by how many people are beneath us, you know those lower down the ladder of achievement and prestige. But that ladder has no place in the Kingdom of God. Jesus says that if you welcome this child, this representative of those who have no status you welcome him. And that's what true greatness in the Kingdom of God is like. It's about selfless, sacrificial service. "If anyone wants to be first, he or she must be the very last, and the servant of all" says Jesus.

And being a servant is the essence of discipleship: it means being willing to serve those of no status without expecting anything in return. It's about following the example of Jesus who said he did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for us. And it's

when we see what he did for us on the cross that we see what selfless, sacrificial service really means. In being a disciple it means we follow the example of Jesus.

But then it's not something we do out of duty; on the contrary it's a loving response for all that he has done for us.

And that reminds me of a story I shared about 10 years ago but I think it's worth sharing again as it makes an important point. It's a true story and comes from Tony Campolo, the American sociologist and activist and someone who is passionate about Jesus and social justice.

And he tells of the time when he was on a train leaving London. And sitting across from him are two men, one of whom suddenly has a severe epileptic fit and falls onto the floor trembling and shaking violently. And immediately his friend rolls up a newspaper and inserts it between the man's teeth to keep him from biting his tongue. And then when the fit is over, he lifts him back onto the seat, and takes off his own coat and puts it round him to keep him warm.

Then turning to Tony Campolo he says: "I hope that what you saw there didn't upset you too much Mr but we never know when these fits are going to occur." He then went on to explain how the two of them had been in Vietnam together. He was an American and his friend was British. They had both been seriously wounded, he had lost a leg and his friend had half his chest torn away by the explosion of a hand grenade, and was so badly injured he couldn't move without excruciating pain.

A helicopter had been on its way to take them to hospital but when it was shot down, his British friend somehow or other got up on to his feet, reached down and grabbed hold of his shirt and began to pull him through the jungle. But every single movement and step caused him to scream in pain. He called to his friend to save himself, as there was no way he was going to get them both out of the jungle – but somehow he did.

"And then when I discovered my friend had this condition" said the American "I sold my apartment in New York and came over here to be with him because someone has to be with him all the time. So maybe knowing a little of our story it might help you to understand what you may have found upsetting."

And then responding to a comment from Tony Campolo he said: "please don't be impressed. There is nothing to be impressed about. After what he did for me, there isn't anything I wouldn't do for him."

Well taking on the role of a servant in the way Jesus describes might seem a little daunting but this morning as we look once more to the cross on which Jesus died - shouldn't that be our response too: "After all he has done for me; there isn't anything I wouldn't do for him."

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Sermon preached at St Laurence's, Scalby at a service of Morning Worship on Sunday 19th September 2021

