

Our Scriptures this morning from the Old Testament are strangely encouraging. Full of praise for those “who delight in the law of the Lord” (Psalm 1) or going on (at some length) about the resourcefulness, diligence and energy of “a capable wife”, whose efforts are too often (in Scriptures) unsung. Men of faith – women of action – even the innocence of children is celebrated (by the time we get to Jesus); all in recognition of the kind of service that will mark those who are ‘on God’s side’. When thinking about what counts as greatness, or how to measure success, this morning’s lessons seem to cover all the bases. For in the end, the lessons of Scripture are less about where we will spend eternity, and more concerned with how we approach life – one another – and ultimately, how we imagine, approach, and honour God...except Jesus is talking about death; specifically, his death.

We know it; his disciples know it. HE doesn’t want the world to know yet – better that the news is kept close - because it is troubling, disruptive, discouraging news. Jesus offers his revelation to the disciples as they travel along the road. It is for their ears only – but “they did not understand what he was saying AND WERE AFRAID TO ASK HIM [for an explanation...]” (Mark 9:32).

It might be hard for us to grasp what is starting to happen here. Up until this point, there had been challenges, to be sure, but mostly there has been fellowship, and miracles, and (most recently in the geography of Mark’s gospel) a stunning moment on the hilltop with Moses and Elijah. The story that Mark (and all the gospels) is telling first establishes Jesus credentials and then comes to a head during that fateful Passover in Jerusalem...but the disciples can’t come to terms with the contrast. This teacher – this miracle maker – who ought to be the salvation of Israel, is now painting a much different picture of what salvation – not to mention what service, or power, or leadership, or faith - looks like.

All they can think about is ‘who will take his place?’ Their conversations about who is the greatest are at least partly motivated by the need to have someone step in to Jesus’ leadership role, for if Jesus is about to be betrayed and killed, then someone needs to be prepared to keep this train rolling.

All this 'greatness' talk hides the fact that no matter how often Jesus speaks about his coming death, they never seem to hear that there is a stunning twist to the story; "...and three days after being killed, he will rise again." They do not understand because they can't believe what they're hearing. It was unthinkable that their beloved friend could be so cruelly treated. It was unbelievable that anyone might be raised from the dead.

To illustrate how completely the coming events would change things, Jesus is trying to teach them a new model of service. Well, not new really – it is a principle that keeps showing up in the sacred literature. Blessed are the meek. The last shall be first. The younger will serve the elder. God does not judge as we judge. Jesus says – and not for the last time – if you really want to lead, you must serve. If you want to do more than appear to be important, then you need to concentrate on the ordinary, the outcast, those who are unable to 'return the favour' because they have no power; no standing; no greatness that the world would recognize. The nearest example to hand was a small child. Welcome one such child, Jesus says, and you've entered fully into the presence of God.

We know what it's like...to welcome the innocence of a child into our lives; to face endless questions from someone who trusts you to give them the right answers 'because you're old(er)'. We would do well to remember that, although there are too many instances of people taking advantage of that trust and innocence, our first instinct is to protect, nurture and care for our young (that's a survival thing). Our instinctive approach to children mirrors the kind of service that Jesus calls us to. We lead children - especially in their early years - by doing things they cannot do for themselves. We hope that they will learn by watching us - copying our behaviour.

And just as children learn habits of all kinds from the adults in their lives, the habits of faith can have a far-reaching impact on people (young and old) whom we encounter. Not because we 'lead with authority'; not because we possess irresistible personalities, or convey secrets to success in handy, quotable lists. In this coming kingdom of grace that Jesus proclaims, the leaders will serve with humility; with compassion; wanting only the best for those who look to them for guidance.

This model of greatness was always within the disciples' reach; the evidence was always among them. Jesus example continues to call us to a different kind of service - to a gentler, more modest kind of greatness. In Jesus name, we are invited to look past those things that the world would convince us were barriers; race, gender, language, nationality - not to mention politics, religion, economics and other culturally formed fences. In Jesus name, we are asked to consider that our actions affect those around us - that our influence can change the world - one life at a time.

In the future that Jesus asks his disciples to imagine, all the children of God are serving, and all are served; for when each lives to serve all, then all are truly equal, and God is truly glorified.

We're not there yet, but then, our time is not yet up. Opportunities to serve abound. God's children are everywhere, and greatness lives in even the least of them.