

WHAT MAKES SOMEONE GREAT?

MARK 9:30-37

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."

He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child 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."

Bible Reflection

I wonder, have you ever met anyone famous? Maybe you have met a celebrity, but they don't seem to be famous for very long, do they? What makes someone famous, or great?

Let me ask you a question...What did John the Baptist, Atilla the Hun and Alexander the Great all have in common?

A: They all had the same unusual middle name - 'the.'

The most popular names were for children born so far this year are: Liam or Noah for a boy, and Olivia for a girl. However, the reports didn't tell us how many children had 'the' as their middle name.

It's not a common middle name anymore ('the'), and neither is Alexander's surname ('great'), though it's not hard to come up with a goodly number of 'great' historical figures: 'Herod the Great,' 'Peter the Great,' 'Alfred the Great' and 'Catherine the Great' and a host of other 'great' people.

Perhaps there are some who still aspire to the name, for the truth is that deep down all of us, even if we don't aspire to the title, would nonetheless like to be 'great.' And not just great at what we do, but 'great' in the sense of perceived as

being great, in the same way the disciples in today' Gospel reading wanted to be 'great.'

Sigmund Freud believed that the lust for pleasure was at the basis of all human behaviour. Human beings naturally move towards pleasure and away from pain, and this is the basis of all human behaviour, said Freud.

Alfred Adler though, suggested that there was an even more fundamental driving force at work in the human psyche - greater still than our natural desire for pleasure, and it is the lust for power!

We human beings want to be significant. We want to be 'somebodies.' None of us wants to live our life as a 'nobody' and die in obscurity, and be remembered for nothing. No, we want to be 'somebodies.' We want our life to count for something. We want to achieve something, and ultimately, get the recognition and authority and greatness that comes with being a somebody. In the end we want to be powerful.

We want to be great. We would like to be the greatest. And that's not just true for us today, but has been true throughout human history, which is why it should not surprise us to find Jesus' disciples (even in the midst of a discussion about their masters impending suffering and death) discussing amongst themselves which one of them was to be the greatest.

And how does Jesus respond to this? He presents a child to them and says, "Whoever welcomes a child like this in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

What an odd thing to do! Why a child? Was Jesus trying to break their concentration by focussing them on something cute? Probably not.

Was he wanting to offer the child as an example to them? He does that elsewhere ("Unless you become like little children, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God" - Matthew 18:3). But the exhortation here is not to be like little children, but to accept them - not to emulate them, but to be open to them.

For the whole point of the child is that the child is not great - especially not in the society in which Jesus was teaching. Children were weak, vulnerable, needy, and they contributed nothing to the social process. In the society of Jesus' day children were not worth very much. Infant mortality rates were high, and children were always the first to suffer from famine, disease, war and dislocation.

Yet Jesus says 'this is the person I identify with. This is the person you need to be spending time with. She is the one who needs you. She is the one you need

to receive and welcome, for when you receive her you receive me (and when you receive me, you receive not only me but Him who sent me!).

We want to be powerful. We want to be significant. But Jesus' bias is always towards the marginalised, the powerless, the vulnerable and the insignificant.

"When you do something for the least of these, my brethren", says Jesus, "you do it for me" (Matthew 25:31ff) "and when you receive one of these you receive me".

Here we are, wanting to be great and engage ourselves in important things, and meet with great and important people, while Jesus urges us to spend time with the weak and the vulnerable, and tells us that "If anyone wants to be first, he must be last of all, and servant of all."

And Jesus, of course, doesn't just teach us this in words. He modelled it. Only the twelve get an explicit mention by the Gospel writer, but evidently it went without saying that wherever Jesus was there would always be children and women, and any number of other persons that society would not have deemed worthy of mention, but who were in fact the very persons that Jesus most identified Himself with!

Those of us who would follow Jesus must open our hearts and our homes to the weak and the vulnerable, recognising that when we open ourselves to these little ones, we receive Jesus in the process.

Jesus came to die the most shameful death imaginable, so we could live in honour as children of God and joint heirs with Him forever. The First came to be the Last. The Greatest came to be the Least, and He invites us to follow him. Do you remember what Jesus said to his disciples the first time He told them He was headed to Jerusalem to die? He said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). If we want to be truly great, then we must follow the one who came to be the least and last among us. If we want to have the kind of influence Jesus had, then we must be like him.

So, what ministry is God asking you to be involved in? How can you serve him today? How can you serve your brothers and sisters? How can they serve you?

Here are some areas that you may want to think about:

Helping run Sunday School

Helping at Little Saints Parent & Toddler Group

Helping at Messy Church

Washing the church linen

Volunteering for the Church tea and coffee rota

Joining our Open the Book team visiting schools
Nuneaton Foodbank
Babysitting for a neighbour
Pastoral visits to the housebound or lonely
Lifts for people to shops, hospital, or Church?

There is a new local Christian charity called Here2Help that is looking for volunteers who can offer practical skills to bless others who need help. Please let me know if you can help, or if you need their help.

What do you want to do for God before you die? What passion has he laid upon your heart? Are you going to listen to him and say yes? Or are you going to miss out on his blessing and wonder 'what on earth am I doing'?

Please make the time this week to pray about this. It might be the best thing you ever did! Amen. *Frank*