

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 1st August 2021 – Andy Banks
Mark 9:30-41 ‘Jesus’ Call For Childlike Humility’

We’re continuing our series in Mark’s Gospel, asking ourselves the question Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say I am?” Which has a follow up question, “What difference does who he is make to your life?” We read today from Mark 9:30-41.

[Read Mark 9:30-41]

30They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, 31because 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.’ 32But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

33They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the road?’ 34But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

35Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.’

36He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, 37‘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.’

38‘Teacher,’ said John, ‘we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.’

39‘Do not stop him,’ Jesus said. ‘For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, 40for whoever is not against us is for us. 41Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.

[Pray]

The Olympics is by far my favourite sporting event. I just love the variety of sports on offer. Of course, every time it comes around there are the inevitable debates about who were the greatest ever Olympians. And not just in one sport, but across sports too. From a British perspective, do Chris Hoy’s and Jason Kenny’s shared record of six golds and one silver count for more than Bradley Wiggins’ five golds, one silver and two bronzes? Or do Steve Redgrave’s five golds and one silver eclipse all of them because he can only win one medal in each Olympic Games, whereas track cyclists can win multiple medals? One thing is certain: the so-called greatest Olympians are invariably the winners. Very occasionally a brave non-winner comes to prominence, as with swimming efforts of Eric the Eel, or the iconic pictures of the injured Derek Redmond being helped across the line by his dad. But generally, the celebrated athletes are the ones who come first frequently.

And the same is true in life in general. It is the people who make the most money, the people who rise to the top of their field, the people who win awards for their excellence whom we celebrate. It reminds me of the very silly joke: “Why was the scarecrow given an award? Because he was outstanding in his field.”

But Jesus’ priorities were very different, and the disciples were somewhat slow to catch on to that. In particular, whenever he sought to instruct them about the path of the *cross* that lay ahead of him, they were extremely slow to understand the significance of that, and how it should affect their own behaviour. He began to teach them about the suffering he would endure at the hands of the Jewish religious leaders, “and that he must be killed and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31). And Peter foolishly tried to rebuke him: “Never, Lord! ... This shall never happen to you!” – a complete misunderstanding of the divine necessity of Jesus’ death for our

salvation. Here, again, he told them plainly that he would be delivered over to men who would kill him, before he would be resurrected three days later. And aside from, again, having no idea what he was on about, they also responded by having an argument about which of *them* was the greatest! Their master and leader had told them that he came to serve, to offer his life for them, but they completely failed to understand the pattern of servant leadership that he thereby set for them. All they could think about was their own status and prestige!

And I'm sure that Jesus knew full well what they were arguing about. That's why he called them out on it by asking them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" I can imagine the sense of shame in their silent response as they realised but refused to own up to their sin. They must have known, deep down, that this was never an argument Jesus would approve of! Of course, Jesus rebuked them not to *crush* them but rather to *free* them from such worldly encumbrances such that they would become fit to be the leaders in his Church that God had destined them to be. For, in the Kingdom of God, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very *last*, and the *servant* of all."

In God's Kingdom, those who are most celebrated, are those who *serve* others, straining with all their might for the spread of the Gospel, and for others' wellbeing. They are the Pauls of this world, who put up with prison, floggings, beatings, stonings, shipwrecks, and no end of dangers so as to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ, not to mention the smearing of his character from those within the church, and what he calls, the daily pressure of his concern for the all the churches (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). They are the Tabithas of this world, for whom, when she died (before God brought her back to life), all the widows of the town came to mourn, because of the many clothes she had made for them (Acts 9:39). They are the Priscillas and Aquilas of this world, who gave of their time and knowledge to mentor and equip Christians with far greater skills than their own so that others might fulfil their God-given potential (Acts 18), and who risked their lives for Paul. So, Paul says of them, "Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them" (Romans 16:4). "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."

Yet, servant leadership was not even on the disciples' radar at this point. They were all about promoting their own greatness, trying to win one over each other in status and power. That is also demonstrated in John's little interjection, which, again, no doubt he thought was the right thing to do: "Teacher ... we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because *he was not one of us*." It's all about them, you see. Guarding their own little sphere of influence. And no doubt Jesus' reply came as a surprise: "Do not stop him ... whoever is not against us is for us."

It's not clear from the account if this man was a true believer in Jesus or not, though the success of his ministry might suggest that he was a believer, even though not one of the twelve. But essentially Jesus was saying, "If he's grasped the power that there is in my name and is using that power in a way that glorifies me, that's all that matters, not whether or not he's officially part of *your* group. Even if an outsider blesses you with something as simple as a cup of water because you belong to me, they will be rewarded for it!"

You see, for some people, having an opportunity to serve in the church's work can be the catalyst for their journey to faith. That's why the Foodbank, for instance, welcomes helpers who are Christians and helpers who are not yet Christians, providing they accept the Christian ethos with which the group is run. There are areas of church life where I think people should be committed Christians to serve – overseeing the actual teaching of our children for instance, but not necessary just to help out in the children's work, providing they are still willing to promote the church's teachings. And there are many other areas of church life, where we should continue to allow people to serve if they wish, whether or not they yet have a faith. "Whoever is not against us is for us."

But the enduring image from this passage is that of a humble child. Jesus placed a little child among them, small enough that he could take him in his arms. And he said to his disciples, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me.” Now, to feel the full force of these words, we need to understand the place of children in Israel at the time. Yes, the Psalmist had said,

“Children are a heritage from the LORD,
 offspring a reward from him.
 Like arrows in the hands of a warrior
 are children born in one’s youth.
 Blessed is the man
 whose quiver is full of them.” (Psalm 127:3-5).

But that was primarily understood for the benefit that the children would be to their parents when they became old. Unlike our present-day idealisation of children, first century Israel was not a child-centred society. They were not celebrated as examples of trust and innocence. On the contrary, they were at best weak and insignificant members of society. Although the males were circumcised eight days after birth so they could officially join the community, yet for the most part children were considered *not yet* “people of the covenant,” because of their incapacity to keep the Law of Moses. So, to welcome such inconsequential little people, especially for a man to welcome them, was to do exactly what Jesus was telling his disciples to do: to become the last, to take the lowest place, to become the servant of *all*.

This was incredibly radical teaching at the time! But it is hard for us to really feel its impact, because this teaching has so shaped our society over the centuries that we have almost gone the other way and elevated the needs and wants of children, especially our own, above all other priorities in our lives, including the priorities of the Gospel! That, too, needs to be challenged. But, nevertheless, it does us well to recognise that our elevation of children stems originally from this radical teaching of Jesus about their value, and about the time we should give to them. Children are not the Church of tomorrow. They may be the *leaders* of tomorrow, but they are the *Church* of today. And it is one of our intentions in employing a children’s worker that we should seek for ways to involve our children more within all of our church life and service. We adults can learn from them as much as they learn from us.

Of course, once again, the disciples were slow to learn this lesson, as is shown in the next chapter when they sought to turn away parents who were bringing their infants to receive a blessing from Jesus. But Jesus’ point is clear: become the least to welcome the least, become the servant of all from the little child up. In the next chapter he would go still further and tell us that to even *enter* the Kingdom of God we must *become* like children. If you want to become great, become like a humble child. “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.” This is Jesus’ way – the servant way of the cross. We are all called to serve not our own needs and wants, but to “serve *one another* humbly in love” (Gal 5:13).

So, I return to our second key question for this series, “What difference does who Jesus is make to your life today?” How willing are you to become less to serve the needs of others? What would that look like in the church? In your workplace? In your home? In any area of your life in which you have a leadership role? Would people see anything different about your behaviour compared to others? Would people know by your actions that you follow the One who was the greatest humble servant of all?

[Pray]