



20th September 2015
Mark 9.30-37

Last –First!

Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Whether it's X Factor, Britain's Got Talent or Strictly Come Dancing– after a long fought competition there is the now obligatory drum role, the lights dim and the announcer lingers for what seems like forever before declaring the series winner. The runners up fade into the background their talents seemingly inadequate because only one person or couple can lift the trophy, take the prize or cash the cheque. Our society seems to be besotted with the idea of coming first.

And so it seems were the disciples in today's reading.

Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem and by this point in Mark's narrative he's left Caesarea Philippi in the north and is passing through Galilee. The disciples have been with him coming up three years yet they say inappropriate things, keep children away, are anxious when they should be sleeping or asleep when they should be anxious.

There is a hint in the story that they sort of realised this was perhaps their lowest moment and well might they be just a touch shame faced with all this talk of who will be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

It's clear that they still found the topsy- turvey, story based, tradition challenging message of Jesus baffling. Perhaps it was just that no one had ever prepared them for this kind of teaching and teacher. And I guess we wonder if we would have been anything different. Indeed we probably see ourselves in the impetuous Peter, the doubting Thomas or the loyalty torn Judas.

We can, I think also be encouraged that today's reading describing their lowest point wasn't their final destination on the journey of faith. After the resurrection Jesus spends a great deal of time reassuring and even reinstating them.

You don't have to pass an exam when it comes to faith – you have to walk a road – a pilgrimage of discovery and trust, of making mistakes and then grasping new lessons.

So in the comings and goings of today's lectionary passage Jesus skilfully and subversively redefines 'greatness'. New categories are proposed for determining success and failure, winning and losing, achievement and unfulfillment.

He even takes a child – and that action is described in such a loving way – that putting his arm around the child said 'Whoever receives a child like this in my name – receives me'.

In Jesus' day children had no status. They were certainly not the winners in society – yet to be part of God's Kingdom is to show generous hospitality to children – in fact to be hospitable, respectful and welcoming to all regardless of their social standing or, private wealth.

We can almost see the red faces of the disciples as Jesus lets the child go – the penny drops. Greatness is being refashioned by Jesus and is about loving service and generous hospitality – ultimately defined more by a cross than a crown.

This, of course, isn't exactly the way that we have traditionally defined greatness.

Human beings have mostly attributed value to those who have power. That can be the power of money, political influence or family position. At its worst it's got something to do with putting yourself up by putting others down. And even as we say that I guess we feel uneasy about that sort of power which subordinates other people.

But it can also be that we, as individuals and a society, willingly give power to the strongest. In this scenario we are saying such people are of the greatest value in our world. And immediately I say that I become very uncomfortable with such a way of thinking.

It's this mindset that creates vacuous celebrity – building a person up to a great position because they are physically strong or beautiful – or even because they have dominant personality.

Jesus subverts both these understandings of power. He questions the standard values of the movers and shakers in society and says: If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all.

And, of course, Jesus didn't only say these words but lived them too. He incarnated them and became the Servant King, the Lord who washes his disciples' feet, the Saviour who meets violence with peace and dies upon the cross.

Now this week as I've been pondering today's text I've been wondering what it says to a church like ours. A church in which many of you in the congregation have in fact risen to the top of your professional trees. Once there you will have been conscious of a certain sense of power resting with you.

I don't think Mark 9 is about having a lack of ambition, it doesn't make a virtue of being number two in your chosen field.

What it is surely saying is use the power you may have with compassion for others, never lording it over them but always seeking to respect and encourage them.

I've no doubt that having money brings with it a very real sense of power. And the same is true – being rich is not a sin, but being selfishly rich almost certainly is.

And it's the same when it comes to human relationships – Parents, for a time have power over children – of course eventually that situation is reversed. What matters is how the first becomes last and in a family context it is all about the outworking of tough, everyday, down to earth love – a love that has a sense of commitment and selflessness about it, at times a tough love that motivates and spurs us on.

We all might do well to go home from church and think about the sort of power we possess as individuals and as a church and how we might use it generously and compassionately to encourage and nurture others around us.

I love the story of Michael Griffiths – a onetime Principal of The London

Bible College and Chair of Scripture Union. Upon his retirement one of the Scripture Union Board Members wrote this in an article I read: At the end of our meetings you would often find Michael with a tea towel in his hand drying up the coffee cups.

Or another experience that made a deep impression on me as a Theological student in London during the 1980's. I would regularly go to All Souls, Langham Place next to the BBC. John Stott, a world famous evangelical Anglican was Minister Emeritus when I used to go along. He would often be asked to preach the sermon but when he wasn't down for that he regularly did nothing more in the service than hold the arms dish and receive the offering.

The first shall be last. And it's absolutely not about becoming Uriah Heap from Dickens's David Copperfield with his insincere catch phrase – I'm ever so, ever so umble!

Jesus is not asking for a false humility and he is not criticising those who have power per se.

Instead he is surely pointing us to the beauty of showing humility within power – which essentially is to use power unselfishly for the benefit of others.

And Mark speaks to us today of a Jesus who practiced what he taught – and may we have that same integrity in our lives in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Ian Green, Amersham, Friday 18th September 2015