

James and John: a sermon by Rev Carol Harley on Mark 10:35-45 (17.10.21)

In this morning's Gospel story from Mark, we hear that well-known story of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, stating that they wish to sit in privileged positions either side of Jesus in glory, one at the right and one at the left. At this the disciples begin to argue amongst themselves about who is the greatest. This desire for power and control is not what Jesus has prepared the twelve for and he calls them together and tells them, 'if one of you wants to be great, he must be the servant of all, and if one of you wants to be first, he must be your slave'.

In contrast to Jesus' teaching, ours is a culture where greatness is increasingly measured by celebrity, if you're a good looking member of a boy band, marry a man who can magically kick a football over a wall of players and your picture will be everywhere. Greatness is about who is the fittest! The slimmest! The cleverest! Or the richest! Ours is a culture which often estimates people in terms of wealth! The size of the house! The make of the car! The name on the label! These are the important signs.

It's style and image that matter. All we have to do is look successful and you are! And we also judge people by their power: Start a dot com company! Put a bronze plaque on the door - and you have influence!! Yet some of these fashion, sports and pop icons and others who've made their millions have spent their lives reaching the top only to find that the ladder of success has been leaning on the wrong wall.

But a tendency to admire those who get to the top is not unique to us people. The same hunger for recognition lay behind the request for James and John to ask for the seats of honour in Jesus' Kingdom which we heard about this morning. We are not asking for the top jobs you understand, two senior cabinet posts will be alright! But into these high hope, Jesus drops a cultural bombshell. 'Whoever wants to become greater than you, must be your servant - and whoever wants to be first, must be slave of all'.

Welcome then to the upside down kingdom of Jesus. Here, the first are last, and Service is not a stepping stone to greatness. It's what greatness is all about.

The best kind of living, according to Jesus, isn't about waiting to fill the shoes of the person above us - it's cleaning the shoes of the person below us. Because the way up is down.

Just imagine the reaction in the Commons if the Prime Minister volunteered to make the coffee and do the photocopying at the next Cabinet Meeting. We need to remember that this isn't about role-reversal - but attitude. Jesus isn't against power or authority - but he is concerned whether we use it to control others and to feed our self-importance OR to release people and build their self esteem.

For Christ - it's the POWER OF LOVE - not the LOVE OF POWER which defines true greatness.

And so, in the home that means us using our influence to empower not dominate our children - and what a difference it would make to some marriages if couples worked this through.

So many areas of life might be transformed if we tried to serve others so they could reach their potential - and that includes the Church which would always benefit from a large injection of the servant spirit - because churches of all traditions haven't escaped this obsession with status. Companies may have their corporate ladders but we have our ecclesiastical ones!

The response of the two brothers, to Jesus' statement, that to achieve their career goals would involve drinking the cup of suffering, was over confident. 'We can handle it', was their response. They had no idea, what they were saying. All they could see was the prestige of their celebrity status. And when the other disciples heard of their attempted bid for power - they complained that if there were any jobs going - they should be open to all of them!!

That's a view I expect we're all familiar with today.

Happy are the go-getters - for they get on in the world.

Happy are the thick-skinned - for they never let life hurt them

Happy are those who complain - for they get their own way in the end.

Happy are the slave-drivers - for they get results.

Happy are the trouble-makers - for they MAKE people take notice of them.

These sorts of attitudes are a million miles away from the teaching of Jesus - who talked about the blessings of the poor in spirit, and the meek of the earth, the merciful and the peace makers. He offers himself as the strong leader of that very different culture, saying: 'Even the Son of Man did not come to be served - but to serve.'

Down the generations disciples of Jesus have responded to this call to serve. Jesus saw his life as an example to us - and millions of people have followed in his footsteps ever since - but there is something else that Jesus says here:

'The Son of Man came to serve and to give his life to redeem many people.' He saw his death then as being for us and no-one can copy that unique sacrifice - because there at the Cross, Jesus learned what it meant to be truly 'one of us'. In all the physical pain and suffering that the Cross involved - there was a deeper spiritual meaning. Jesus was giving Himself for us. He was taking on himself our sins like pride and self-importance. Assuming our guilt and then, so we could be set free, paying the ultimate price. He became the Servant King whose life brings us more than just the pattern to copy - because his death gives us a new way for knowing God

By modern standards of greatness, I suppose Jesus was a failure. He didn't win an Oscar, he didn't score a last-minute goal, no-one regarded him as a superstar or a sex symbol - no, he walked a much different road, carrying a cross of service and suffering but his life has changed all of our lives forever and his death turned the world upside down. In Him we see power under control - a gentle strength, an attitude of self giving to build in others hope. A King who didn't stand on his dignity or rights.

In Jesus we see a whole new way of valuing people and measuring greatness. May we learn to truly serve and so grow a little more into His likeness.

*In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.*