

Sermon for Proper 20 Year B

Mark 9:33-37

We live in a society where people are awarded for being the best in their field. There are the Logies, the Oscar's, the Emmy's for the best and most outstanding in the television and movie industry. In sport, there is the Allan Border award which recognises the most outstanding Australian cricketer of the past season. There is the Brownlow medal for the best and fairest player in the AFL. There is the Dally M medal for the best and fairest in the NRL. You only need listen to the commentators when state of origin comes around, as to who they think is the greatest team, and who are the greatest players in each team. There are awards given to the best sportswomen of the year. The Commonwealth and Olympic games see competitors striving to be the greatest in their field.

In our schools we have awards nights to recognise the outstanding effort that students have put in to their education. In the workplace, there are often 'employee of the month' awards.

It's in our human nature to be competitive, and even be a bit jealous when awards are given out that we have been striving hard for. Competing can be fun and healthy.

But it can also be destructive as the human nature can be proud and selfish, to the point where the desire to be the greatest causes arguments amongst friends and family, and cause people to turn against you.

The disciples in today's reading were arguing amongst themselves as they were walking along about who was the greatest amongst them.

Perhaps we were once asked by our parents after having an argument with our siblings: "What were you arguing about?" Or perhaps we had an argument with someone in the classroom or school yard and the teacher asked: "What are you arguing about?"

Sometimes what you were arguing about becomes trivial when asked to explain to it. So, like the disciples we would rather not say. Ever had that feeling?

We only need to look at history, to see the desire to be the greatest person, or the greatest empire has ended in murder and war with total disregard to human life. We can see that the words in James 4 are true. James asks: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill."

This has been happening for a long time, right back to the first family when Cain killed Abel because Abel's offering was more acceptable to God than Cain's. The desire to be the greatest battled away inside until Cain killed his brother.

James 3:13 says: "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom."

The wisdom of God is that Jesus humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

God almighty humbled himself and took on human form in the person of Jesus Christ to be a servant so that no one should perish or be left out of his kingdom.

Our Lord Jesus had only just told the disciples yet again that he would be handed over to suffer and die. Yet they were still driven by this inner desire to be the greatest.

They did not understand that the Messiah, the one leading them, teaching them, was not seeking greatness, but has come serve, to suffer and die, that all may be saved.

Because the disciples still argued, Jesus took a little child in his arms and 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."

Why would Jesus use a child as an example of putting oneself last? Perhaps it's because, when we have children, our lives are completely changed as we meet their needs.

To the disciples, children were treated as though they were not important and ignored. A bit like the term that we thankfully don't hear said much anymore: 'children should be seen and not heard'.

Jesus teaches the disciples that this little child is to be placed as important. Where the disciples would have no disregard to the views of that child, Jesus placed the child in place of equality even putting the child first. He took the child and had him stand among them. He then took the child in his arms, arms of love and acceptance, and said, 'if anyone 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.'

Jesus is teaching us that there is no-one whom we should think is less worthy to be welcomed into the comfort and safety of Jesus' arms. Rather, with a servant heart, we are to put ourselves last to make sure they have an encounter with Jesus and experience his loving embrace. To know that in Jesus, they have a heavenly Father who welcomes them.

To Jesus, greatness is not a quest for power, or to use others as a ladder to climb up higher. For Jesus greatness is to get alongside the weak, the hurting, the broken hearted and the despised people and show them compassion, for them to see that they are just as worthy of receiving grace from Jesus as everyone else.

We serve each other as Christ serves us. We welcome the 'little ones' in our midst and therefore welcome Jesus Christ. We value the children in our church, and show they are important. So how are we willing to put ourselves last and put them first?

In another sense we are all little ones of God. After all, Jesus has welcomed us all as a child in his arms. Therefore, we welcome each other as children of God, as we welcome Jesus in our lives.

As Jesus' disciples, by grace and with the Holy Spirit's help, we become servants of each other. To put ourselves last in the quest for others to know Jesus, is much better than seeking a great position for ourselves, whatever that could be.

There have been and will be to come great sporting achievements, great inventions, great musicians and performers, yet Jesus teaches us today that true greatness surpasses even the most impressive and significant human greatness. Yet as the years go by, and there is a new generation,

those who were once great athletes and performers, even great leaders, the memories of them pass by unless we are reminded of who they are.

True greatness has surpassed all human wisdom. It has come in the servant Jesus. For he came down to our level, he became the least, taking on the role of the servant, even death on the Cross for us so that we might be free of all our sins. Amen.