

## Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

**The Reverend Andrew Sempell**

*Rector of St James*

### **Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

(b-os18)

**23<sup>rd</sup> September 2018**

**Readings:** Proverbs 31: 10-31; Psalm 1; James 3: 1-12; Mark 9: 30-37.

#### *"True Greatness"*

#### **I am the Greatest**

Muhammad Ali (when known as Cassius Clay), proclaimed to the world: "I am the greatest". In response to this bold claim, it might be reasonable to ask: 'the greatest what?' The answer is, of course, 'boxer' - and in this respect I would not have wanted to challenge him. He was, however, less than 'great' in many other areas of his life.

The disciples in today's Gospel reading are described as having a debate over which one of them was the greatest. Again, one may well ask 'the greatest what?' After all, they had just come down from the Mountain of Transfiguration with a feeling of bewilderment, then to be confronted by a child with a demon that they could not cure. There was not much greatness here – indeed, it spoke more of confusion and failure. Moreover, when Jesus questioned them about what they were discussing on the way they fell silent with shame and embarrassment.

An ironic theme runs through Mark's Gospel that focusses on the failure and confusion of the disciples, which is occasionally coupled with their hubris. They often misunderstood Jesus and his mission, whereas the crowds and outsiders understood. The disciples are presented as having been bewildered much of the time, but in today's gospel reading they were described as arguing about which one of them was the greatest! One can only speculate as to what it was that they thought made them great.

Perhaps, like so many of us, it was insecurity that drove them to seek power and status. To be sure, their claim to greatness was not to go away quickly, for it was the disciples James and John who, in the next chapter, asked for the distinction of sitting at Jesus left and right when he became king; and Jesus dismissed them for their impudence.

We too need to be careful lest, in our confusion and insecurity, we grasp after those things that seek to build us up at the expense of others. Moreover, as a church, we need to be especially careful of this temptation, which may otherwise cause us to seek to take power rather than give grace and create oppression rather than offer freedom.

## The Greatness of a Child

There was an outrageous element to Jesus focussing greatness upon a child. Unlike our own times, children were not especially important people in the world of first-century Palestine. Life was often harsh, and children received little protection or privileges outside their own families.

In this instance, Jesus inverted the social-order by valuing a child above his disciples – which may have caused offence. Moreover, he described the nature of God’s world by taking someone who was powerless and proclaiming that this person is the one who is greatest in the kingdom of God. By welcoming a child, Jesus demonstrated God’s priority for the weak, and affirmed the principle that greatness is to be seen in those who do not throw their weight about.

The use of power is a major problem for today’s church leading to abuse, bullying, theft, and irresponsibility. In contrast, the early church had little power and often faced hostility and persecution. It was a very different world from that which emerged a couple of hundred years later when the Emperor Constantine established the Christian church as part of the state and that continued in various forms until modern times.

I suspect that a nostalgia for such cosy church-state relations still grips many church members and leaders today. Indeed we, the church, still seek special status and privileges from the wider community and the state, as the recent debate about ‘religious freedom’ seems to expose. But this is not the way of the kingdom and the cross, as revealed in the Bible.

In contrast, the theological word for today is ‘kenosis’, which means to ‘empty out’ or ‘give away power’ and carries with it the idea of self-sacrifice. The Hymn to Christ in the Letter to the Philippians describes Jesus’ kenosis:

*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,  
but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.  
Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.  
Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form, he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.*

(Philippians 2: 3-8)

This is what the business of taking up your cross and following Jesus entails, and it starts with the recognition of greatness in humility and powerlessness – such that a child might be first in the kingdom of God. The Scriptures urge us to give up our desire for power and control, and instead seek to serve the community.

## **The Problem of Being Church**

We are lucky today, here in Australia, in Sydney, and here at St James! We have inherited many wonderful resources for our earthly ministry from those who have gone before us. They were given with the expectation that we would neither squander them nor be mean-spirited about them, but instead be generous in our use of them for the good of the gospel. But it does not always work out like that.

Unfortunately, institutions of their nature tend to become self-focused and, like a puffer fish, can dress-up their structures and inflate their ideas to make them look more important than they really are - thereby proclaiming that they 'are the greatest'! In this way ideology and status take precedence over love and compassion; but Jesus says it is not to be so with us.

Jesus portrays the Kingdom of God (and by extension the church) as being of another category from earthly power-structures; perhaps, of another dimension – one that we can only see darkly.

There may be a degree of ambiguity and even paradox here. How serious is Jesus being about not making distinctions? So much of our church culture seems to be about deciding who is 'in' and who is 'out', who is 'right' and who is 'wrong', but Jesus is saying we should serve others and receive all.

Jesus' words and actions also seem to suggest that we fail to perceive God's presence around us if we are self-focused. Indeed, God may be present in places where we choose not to look – in this case, in the child rather than in the disciples. This too may say something about God's mission in the world, for God is not limited by the failures of his disciples and may well choose to operate through those who are considered 'outside' the body of believers and certainly beyond the caste religious professionals such as myself.

This is the tension between being a 'sectarian church' and a 'gathered church'. A sectarian church defines itself through adherence to particular beliefs and practices, a concept of membership, and the exclusion of those that are deemed not to belong. A gathered church, on the other hand, is simply the body of believers who choose to turn up and participate in acts of worship, prayer, learning and generosity – all done with a sense of commitment to each other, the community, and God.

## **Nature of the Kingdom**

Jesus reveals God's Kingdom to his disciples when he says: "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." The disciples were yet again bewildered by this statement, for they did not understand and were too afraid to ask him what it meant.

And we may say: ‘But I understand. I know how the story ends. I live on the right side of the Christ event!’ But do we really understand what we are called to do rather than what to think? Sometimes our faith might be nothing more than neo-gnosticism – that is, salvation by knowing (or believing) what is considered to be the right things but not translating it into action.

When Jesus teaches, he does so with the intention to transform rather than inform his listeners. The gospel is not, therefore, about knowing the end of the story (or even its meaning) but by being engaged and challenged by it. The power of the gospel is to be seen in the relationship that the disciples developed with Jesus rather than the ideas they had about him – important as these things may be.

The key that Jesus gives his followers is the resurrection. After death, comes resurrection – but remember; the cross comes first. Here again we strike paradox, for Jesus taught that real life comes from death, and then went on to demonstrate it. How should we respond? Well, we too need to die to the sin of power and self-centeredness and seek renewal in God. For the disciples in the gospel reading, it was about dying to their personal needs of status. New life is about choosing to be vulnerable and trusting God, rather than attempting to control or coerce others.

To be sure, the Christian journey is not about trying to be stronger and cleverer than all around you and thereby seeking to win at every opportunity. Instead, it is about humbly accepting who we are under God, following God's calling, and being faithful.

As the poet, Les Murray, said: “God’s idea of a win is the cross” and for us, that is the sign of greatness.