

the first shall be last...

a sermon preached on the
twenty-second sunday after pentecost

21 October 2018

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by the reverend helen creed

the lections: Isaiah 53:4-12; Ps 91; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10: 35-45

Earlier this year I went to an address by an academic in the field of Education named Kerry Howells; (her main interest is in how feelings of gratitude enhance learning in a classroom, and how feelings of resentment diminish the capacity to learn), but over the last few years one of the things she has done is to work with elite athletes, athletes who are, I'd say, forensically committed to removing anything that will impede their performance. In the talk she told the story of an Australian runner who competed in the Rio Olympics and won a silver medal. This was a huge disappointment to be second in the world in that race, (the athlete attributed it to some resentment she was carrying). Kerry had been employed to help this athlete to resolve certain things in her psyche so that at the next Olympics she's better placed to win a gold medal.

A silver medal at the Olympics – what a shabby achievement. Being on the losing side in an Aussie Rules Grand final – the emotional distance between the winners and the losers is a gaping chasm. Earlier this year I had a year 9 student who cried when I gave her an A on her essay, and I've known a number of students who would not reveal their ATARs (the score students are given at the end of year 12) because they have ended up in the 80s (a perfect score is 99.95). We tell our children that it's the effort that counts, that we just want them to do their best (primary school teachers do this particularly well), but a lot of the time our culture says something different. There is a special kind of hallowing that we reserve for the individuals, the teams and the animals who come first (think about all the places in Australasia where you can see a bit of Phar Lap if you wish).

*Before I go on, I need to say that I am not against the pursuit of excellence, in whatever field of endeavour, but to be unhappy with something of quality is a troubling aspect of our culture.

I am always wary of assuming that Middle-eastern people from 2000 years ago felt the same way about things as we do, but our gospel reading today suggests that the desire to reach the top of the pile, to sit in the seats of honour, was highly prized then as now.

Our story from Mark, tells of a time when James and John ask Jesus, very directly, and very cheekily, to grant their wish to sit beside him "in [his] glory". This text is, of course, part of a whole raft of stories throughout the gospels which are intended to show how little the disciples understand about Jesus and his destiny, how little they grasp of the kind of glory he will achieve, and how oblivious they are about the path he "must" take to get there.

What I see in this story is a tension that sits at the heart of our human condition: On the one hand, we long for greatness, don't we, for glory, for firstness; if not for ourselves, then perhaps for others. On the other hand, we show a great capacity to misunderstand what greatness really is, and how we might become truly first. For isn't it the case that we regularly put our heart and soul into the pursuit of kinds of greatness and glory that in the end bring us not the fulfillment we so crave, but the emptiness we do not want.

"Grant us to sit, one at your right hand, and one at your left, in your glory." The request could not be clearer, and neither is the response . . . "No". But it's more interesting than just a simple

No. In fact, Jesus aims to burst the happy bubble of anticipation that James and John are rolling around in, not once, not twice, but three times over the course of this story. First: with a rhetorical question (that they do not recognise as rhetorical): “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink . . .?”, Jesus says - a reference to the rejection, suffering & brutality to come . . . to which they reply “we are”! Second: with a very direct statement: it “is not mine to grant”; and third: with some explicit teaching about what greatness really is, and what they will need to do if they truly want to be “great” or “first” in the kingdom of God. This all leads to the question that I’d like to explore with you today – why is Jesus so determined to burst their bubble? What is it about the request that warrants such a concerted response?

So, let’s take a moment to explore a bit more what is that James and John are grasping for, and hoping to secure. These two are imagining a time when all is resolved, when all the people of God sit down to a banquet – Jesus will be in the place of honour, and they will be either side of him. It’s not just that they want the best seats in the house, not just that they want to be closest to the best food and wine and service . . . they want to be seen as the *favourites* of Jesus, they want to sit back and bask in his light, and, here’s the rub . . . they want to occupy those seats at the expense of everyone else. It’s not enough for them to just to be at the same table as Jesus – their wish is to be in a place of clear superiority, set apart from all others, the gold medal dais. This is their vision of glory. Now before we rush to scoff at James and John, please let us take an honest moment to reflect on how appealing this seating arrangement might be for us; we’re good Anglicans so of course we wouldn’t be so impolite as to voice our request for a particular seat . . . but would we secretly be hoping to find ourselves there, to know the thrill of being chosen over others?

What Jesus goes on to explain, of course, is that glory as he understands it has nothing to do with ending up in a superior place, or being recognised as an intimate friend of God. Rather, it’s about recognising our radical equality as human beings, it’s about looking to serve rather than be served, paying attention to the people who come across our paths each day because of who they are rather than what they can do for us; it’s about resisting all the hierarchies we create in human society . . . and about an exquisite kind of generosity of spirit, which involves giving ourselves away for the sake of others.

The other thing that Jesus knows, and that James and John do not, is that those used to “lording it” over others are very uneasy with anyone who pursues this kind of glory. Those clinging to political power do not know what to do when a person comes along who captures the imagination of ordinary citizens with glimpses of wholeness, healing, forgiveness, love: the result is violence of one kind or another. James and John are imagining Jesus sitting in splendour at a high banqueting table . . . what Jesus sees is himself strung up on a cross. That cross will look like a moment of crippling shame to the disciples, but they will go on to discover that it is actually a moment of true glory, real greatness, perfect firstness. On the cross, the divine life, having taken on human form, offers everything so that we might become the people God made us to be. There is a banquet ahead, not the one James and John were hoping for . . . it’s a resurrection banquet . . . where all are fed, and all are whole, and every tear is wiped away and there are no distinctions.

Why does Jesus react so strongly to the request of James and John? Because he loves them. Because he came to give them life in abundance. Because he wants them to know joy. James and John were in danger of setting their sights on a glory that is very light on meaning or joy, and Jesus wants to give them the best chance to get back on track, and find themselves at a banquet that will be truly gladdening.

Little James, like the James of this story, and like every other human being who has ever existed, as you live and grow, you will set your sights on many things that will promise glory and greatness, but not deliver. This is your lot, this is all of our lot, part of the mystery of how we become whole. But please know that in all your growing and striving, and understanding and misunderstanding, you will have the love of Jesus to support you, and the challenge of Jesus to bring you home again when you wander off.

So to the God who makes all things work together for good, be all glory and praise.