

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE  
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Reflection – 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity**

**19<sup>th</sup> September 2021**

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Every teacher must have said this or heard it from a colleague: “Students don’t listen, so I have to repeat myself. Always saying the same thing more than once...” Do you think, this is what Jesus is saying to himself at the beginning of today’s Gospel episode?

I’ve heard it said that repetition is the first principle of all learning. Think of how we learn: a teacher restates or reviews a concept, which brings a deeper meaning in a new context. I believe that repetition has a key role to play in learning, and that Jesus of Nazareth had good teaching methods.

For the second time in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples what will happen to him in Jerusalem – betrayal, condemnation, suffering, rejection, a violent death – and then: resurrection. In the light of his first Passion prediction, one would think the disciples could hardly fail to understand. We are already familiar with their reaction, from last week’s Gospel reading: they don’t understand or, at least, they don’t want to understand. And they are afraid to ask. The source of their fear could be manifold: they feel ill-equipped for the challenge, afraid of what it all means. The disciples remember how Peter was rebuked at Caesarea Philippi and want to avoid humiliation. In any case, their fear of asking questions means that they remain in a state of confusion. They miss an opportunity to draw closer to Jesus, because they are too afraid to ask hard questions.

Another reason for the disciples’ silence is their preoccupation with their status in their group: who is the greatest among them? At least half a dozen among them could claim a higher rank. Who was the first to be called by Jesus? Andrew or Peter? Andrew took the initiative to follow Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry, and then he

introduced his brother Simon Peter. Who was chosen by Jesus to witness his glory at his Transfiguration? Peter, James, and John. Who introduced most people to Jesus? Philip seemed to have a natural ability to start conversations with people from outside the group of followers. Who was the treasurer of the disciples' community? Judas.

Who is the greatest then?

I think this is a question that preoccupies people nowadays as much as it did in Jesus' day. Some of us might remember Muhammad Ali's boast on becoming world heavy weight champion: "I am the greatest! I shook up the world! I am the prettiest thing that ever lived." (later, he had the honesty to comment: "I said I was the greatest, not the smartest."). More recently, we all heard the slogan in the 2016 American presidential election: "Make America great again!" On our side of the Atlantic, people are not any humbler. Greatness, we generally assume, implies power, accomplishment, fame, and all the other things that allow one to influence people and to make things go the way one wants.

In announcing his Passion, Jesus taught his disciples that following him involves self-denial, and yet they are set on self-aggrandizement. Jesus has a response: "Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all - and servant of all." True greatness, Jesus says, is not to be above others, but to take the lowest place. This is another counter-cultural lesson.

Jesus identifies greatness with service and empathy, with humility and the willingness to serve rather than be served. Surely it is this that's at the heart of Saint Paul's hymn in his Letter to the Philippians: "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." (2.6-8)

All our arguments about greatness mean nothing if we don't stoop low enough to serve the one who is otherwise invisible in our midst. Greatness on Jesus' terms means being as humble, lowly, and vulnerable as a child.

Indeed, in the first century, children were of little importance. They were not the object of sentimental affection as they can be in our culture. They were dependent, vulnerable, powerless, with no legal status – therefore, voiceless and helpless.

Our thinking is different, isn't it? We value children. We deeply care for them. We incessantly ask of ourselves: Do they receive enough love and affection? A good education? Are they safe at home and at school? Are they being exposed to good role models? Will they have a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives? Will our children have faith? Will they live out that faith in service and showing compassion to others?

All these are concerns we express for children in our families and faith communities. We want to help them get ahead in the world, to become great. To become the greatest. Shouldn't we also order our lives for the good of children who are not our next of kin? Do we have the same concern for unknown children who are abandoned, molested, abused, trafficked, who do not have access to healthcare, education, or food?

The theologians and the Church, in general, say little about children, and I don't think that the significance of God choosing, in becoming human, to take on the fragility of infancy and vulnerability of childhood has been sufficiently explored. The Incarnation, God becoming human, reversed worldly assumption of greatness. Becoming human, God implied that greatness is not about separation, but about solidarity. Not about self-aggrandizement, but about empowerment of others. We are called to embody this kind of greatness, so that the world can witness the true meaning of greatness born out of love.

When Jesus welcomes the child to the centre of the community, he suggests that if we want to be great, then we must practice welcoming and serving those who are vulnerable, powerless, voiceless. God's wisdom is paradoxical: the last will be first, and those whom society might not value, are deeply valued by God. Unless we expand the community's centre so to include those people at the margins, we alienate ourselves from the very presence of Jesus Christ and of the One who sent him.

Greatness on Jesus' terms is risky. But, as Jesus teaches repeatedly, his way of greatness is also the path of life. And on this path, we should never fail to ask questions. There is much we could learn from children and I believe this is yet

another reason behind Jesus' bringing a child among the disciples. Children are not afraid to ask awkward, challenging and even impossible questions. They are not embarrassed by their ignorance. If they don't understand something, they ask and persist in asking. Children teach us to risk asking hard questions on our journey with God, to honour our imagination as a pathway to him, and, ultimately, to trust him as the source of all goodness.

Jesus said: "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, will never enter it." (Mark 10.15)

Amen.