

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

**Sermon – 21st Sunday after Trinity**

**20<sup>th</sup> October 2024**

**All Saints' Marseille and Aix-en-Provence**

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In our culture, there exists a fascination with success and greatness. We yearn to know who is the "greatest of all time" – whether artist, athlete, musician, or president. "Vanity of vanities," says Kohelet, the wisdom teacher. "What has been is what will be, [...] and there is nothing new under the sun."<sup>1</sup>

For centuries, philosophers have wrestled with the concept of glory-seeking, each offering their insights. Plato saw the pursuit of glory as an intrinsic part of the human soul, while Thomas Hobbes viewed it as a tool for social advantage and power.<sup>2</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau identified it as a weapon in the self-made man's arsenal,<sup>3</sup> the most glaring modern-day example being the celebrity culture. For Jean-Paul Sartre, the quest for glory offers a response to existential angst, helping us to believe that we matter.<sup>4</sup> Consider the relentless self-promotion on social media platforms like X, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. We seek the secrets of highly successful people and, if we cannot attain greatness ourselves, we hope at least to bask in the reflected glory of those who have succeeded – hoping, perhaps, that some of their success might rub off on us.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ecclesiastes 1.2, 9*

<sup>2</sup> *Hobbes, The Leviathan*

<sup>3</sup> *Rousseau, Discourse on The Origin of Inequality*

<sup>4</sup> *Being and Nothingness*

This week's Gospel reading recounts what may be the boldest and most presumptuous request in the New Testament. "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." The request is made by James and John, two brothers who have left their father Zebedee's fishing business to follow Jesus. Their request is made immediately after Jesus has foretold his disciples, for the third time, of his impending betrayal, suffering, and death at the hands of the political powers in Jerusalem. Yet, instead of acknowledging Jesus' forewarning of suffering and death, James and John remain fixated on their vision of the kingdom Jesus announces, very much like the structures of human power and authority they know so well and are submitted to. They imagine a triumphant scene when the Messiah will enter Jerusalem, and they seek to secure their places of power beside him – as his closest advisors, his second-in-command.

Although "glory" may not be a word we frequently use today, we can easily recognise what James and John, in an astonishing act of audacity, are asking for: prestige, fame, honour, renown, and applause. They seek unique access to Jesus' power and glory, not only desiring these things, but believing themselves entitled to them. Their ambition rouses the indignation of the other disciples, who fear that James and John might gain an advantage over them.

It is tempting to laugh at or to dismiss the two brothers as naive, immature and self-serving. But Jesus does not react with scorn, he takes their request seriously, asking "What is it you want me to do for you?" He addresses their desire for power and prestige, then comments on the nature of human power – the very power that will soon crush him in his trial and execution – and on the meaning of his death. Jesus redefines power and greatness, setting his life and death,

as well as the lives and sufferings of his followers, in direct opposition to worldly notions of power.

In doing so, Jesus overturns – again - the common pattern of human behaviour. True greatness, he teaches, is not found in domination, political manoeuvring, or the pursuit of personal glory. Instead, is found in self-sacrificial service to others. To be great is to be a servant. This certainly defies all conventional wisdom and human expectations. While earthly greatness is measured by how much power one wields over others, divine greatness is measured by how much one serves others. Jesus' entire life, his teachings, death, and resurrection stand as a demonstration of the true nature of greatness. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

James, John, and the other disciples struggled to grasp that in the kingdom of God, service is not a means to an end - it is the end itself. To serve is to experience glory. A few weeks later, Jesus would take off his outer garment, tie a towel around his waist, and kneel to wash the disciples' feet. "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first must be slave of all." Glory, by Jesus' definition, is not an accumulation of privilege but the continual outpouring of oneself in love and service to others.

The call to servanthood is to all of us, not merely to the few. Are we, too, a servant church?

Henri Nouwen, a Dutch-born Catholic priest, professor and spiritual writer, achieved significant success as an academic, teaching at prestigious institutions such as Yale and Harvard Divinity Schools. Yet, he later left academia to live in one of the L' Arche communities,

together with adults with serious developmental disabilities. This experience his understanding of success and leadership, inspiring him to write *In the Name of Jesus*, a small book called which reflects on the paradoxical nature of Christian leadership and greatness. Nouwen observed that “one of the greatest ironies of the history of Christianity is that its leaders constantly gave in to the temptation of power,” whether political, military, economic, or even moral and spiritual - “even though they continued to speak in the name of Jesus, who did not cling to his divine power” but came to serve. Perhaps, Nouwen suggests, this is because “it seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life.”

The thirst for power and privilege lies at the heart of our human brokenness. Yet, in God’s kingdom, the path to true success lies in relinquishing our claims to privilege. Our faithfulness to Christ is measured by our willingness to serve. The more we serve, the more we become attuned to God’s presence. Above all, when we serve those who have nothing to offer in return. Though the world may scorn these humble acts of service, it is through such seemingly weak means that God’s work is accomplished.

In a few weeks, we will enter the season of Advent, preparing our hearts to contemplate a God who entered humanity as a helpless baby, a God whose greatest displays of power included riding on a donkey, washing dirty feet, and dying on a cross. This is the God of ‘kenosis’, of emptying himself of all privilege, pouring himself out and surrendering his own life for his loved ones. He is the God who turns to each of us and asks, “What is it you want me to do for you?” May we find the courage to make this question our own and turn to the world asking, “What is it you want me to do for you?”