

Greatest welcomes child

Mark 9:30-37

Some are born great, some achieve greatness, some have greatness thrust upon them. So wrote Shakespeare for one of his characters in *Twelfth Night*.

And who knows how many millions I'm joining by quoting it again. This might be a good moment for me to say that in my sermons I often draw heavily on others –their scholarship, their ideas, even some of their words, but I usually prefer not to break the flow of what I'm saying by acknowledging this at the time.

Greatness in people was not a quality which Jesus sought, or not in the way we usually think about greatness. He does speak once about becoming great in the kingdom of heaven by keeping and teaching the commandments, but the only other times Jesus talks about greatness in human beings is in a context of serving others or being like a child, and usually only in response to a question or debate.

What is Jesus saying to us in today's gospel when in the context of the disciples talking of who is the greatest, he talks of being a servant of all and of welcoming children in his name?

Is he recommending what some have called 'banquet behaviour' from the story in Luke where Jesus gives an example of a person taking a lower place at the table being invited to move to a higher place? You know, polishing up your humility so others will push you forward? Could be, because in Proverbs 25 we read: *Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, 'Come up here,' than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.*

We'd better look at the whole passage..... read to us today to see what's going on.

Mark's gospel is short. By chapter 9 we're about halfway through. The first half has been mainly about Jesus' public ministry, travelling around, teaching and healing. But now we're beginning to see some of Jesus' personal struggle as he heads towards Jerusalem and all that awaits him there, not to mention the difficulty of conveying to the disciples the seriousness of what lies ahead.

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples. Jesus wants some time alone with the disciples, away from the distractions of the needy crowds, where they can focus on what he knows they need to hear. So we have here for the second time Jesus predicting what lies ahead for him. In last week's gospel, after Peter identified him as the Messiah, Jesus said *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.* This time the 'culprits' are clearly identified: *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.* He doesn't name any particular person or group; the ultimate responsibility rests with all humankind.

The disciples did not understand. And we're told they 'were afraid to ask' Jesus to explain. What was their fear? Nowhere in the gospels is there an indication that Jesus ever scolded someone for asking for explanations. Nowhere is he conveyed as the sort of teacher who picked on the slow student. No, the disciples probably had enough of an inkling of what he meant that they did not want to hear any more. They didn't want harsh details spelled out. They did not want to understand.

This is emphasised as Mark's story moves on to the little group reaching Capernaum. It seems the disciples must have dragged their feet as Jesus resolutely led the way, because once they were inside a house Jesus asked them what they'd been talking about along the way, in fact what they'd been arguing about. Again the disciples were silent, once more reluctant to give voice to their thoughts. *But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.* This time they were silent for a different reason – probably embarrassment that they'd been jockeying for position.

The irony here is clear: on the way to Jesus' death in Jerusalem, the disciples talk of personal advancement. Jesus embodies sacrifice; they argue about who's the greatest. Jesus had asked them to deny themselves and take up their crosses, but they have instead affirmed themselves and taken up the old pre-schooler debate: 'I'm better than you' or 'mine's bigger or shinier than yours'.

Getting no response to his question, Jesus takes up the role of formal teacher. *He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'* When Jesus speaks like this, he's generally wanting to convey some larger meaning, like when he said: *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*

Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. Such a simple statement, and yet an enigmatic one. So was Jesus really saying 'Be last, be servant, parade your humility, and hey presto you'll be rewarded with your heart's desire of prestige'? They would hardly have been able to believe that, for fairly near the bottom was where they already were, and there were no indications yet that they were making any progress up any ladder. Or was Jesus rather trying to explain the paradoxical nature of the whole organisation of God's realm?

There was, it seems, a question to be asked prior to that of who is the greatest. First there must be clarity about the definition of greatness. How is greatness to be measured? In whose eyes and by what standards is it to be assessed?

As was his custom, Jesus used what his hearers could see or hear or easily imagine to make his point.

Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

What we have in this text is not a sentimental picture of a kindly Jesus surrounded by happy, well-scrubbed healthy youngsters, bouncing the smaller ones on his knee. Children in Jesus' time were worth far less to society than adults. In a book *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* the writers state

Childhood in antiquity was a time of terror. Infant mortality rates sometimes reached 30 per cent. Another 30 per cent of live births were dead by age six, and 60 per cent were gone by age sixteen. Children always suffered first from famine, war, disease and dislocation . . . Children had little status within the community or family. A minor child was on par with a slave, and only after reaching maturity was he/she a free person who could inherit the family estate. The term 'child/children' could be used as a serious insult.

Children were weak and replaceable, powerless and worth little. I've been doing some family history lately, and have seen examples of a child being given the same name as one who died earlier. So for Jesus to suggest that receiving a child might have some value for male disciples is almost inconceivable. Inconceivable, that is, until one realizes that the child becomes a symbol for understanding what Jesus is up to in the world.

A Greek scholar, Henry Thayer, tells us that the word used for welcoming a child, or as in older English versions receiving a child, is much more than not being rude in a short encounter. He says that in this story and in the other gospels, to receive or welcome a child is 'to receive into one's family in order to bring up and educate.' That is, it involves taking on a large and long-term responsibility for someone. It is the committing of resources to someone less well off economically and socially. It's entering into a relationship where the expectation of social or economic rewards is dim at best. It is in this sort of service, undertaken without any reasonable expectation of reward that greatness in God's realm is achieved. It is greatness which is too busy focusing on other matters to be concerned with measuring one's own status. It is the paradoxical greatness of the One who is on his way to Jerusalem and the cross for the sake of others.

It's when we pick up our crosses and show hospitality and kindness to the unlovely and powerless and outcast of the world that we discover we have not only welcomed a stranger, but have received Jesus Christ himself. As our gospel concluded today, *Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*

There's a story of a man who once stood before God, his heart breaking from the pain and injustice in the world. 'Dear God,' he cried out, 'look at all the suffering, the anguish and distress in the world. Why don't you send help?' God responded, 'I did send help. I sent you.'