

True Greatness

19th September 2021

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost 2021.

What is true greatness? And what is humility? What should we be ambitious for? And wherein lies wisdom? Today's readings encourage us to take an introspective look, to look deep inside us, and take stock of what we find. They invite us to look at ourselves in the way that God does, look at ourselves through the eyes of the one who 'tries the heart and the mind', as our first lesson puts it. They encourage us to think and act not out of our own wisdom and strength, but rather to place our trust in the wisdom that comes from above. They assure us that if we act with humility and in the service of others, that God has come close to us.

In our gospel reading, from Mark's gospel, we meet Jesus and his disciples on their way from the Mountain of the Transfiguration to Jerusalem. They are travelling through Galilee, and are taking a break at Jesus' own home, 'the house' in Capernaum, where he had spent his adult years. On their way to Capernaum, Jesus had taught his disciples in private. Some of his friends, James and John and Peter, had just seen him being transfigured, had seen the resurrection light shine on Jesus, as he talked with Moses and Elijah on the Holy Mountain. Peter had just confessed Jesus to be the Christ, God's anointed, the longed-for Messiah. And now Jesus tells them that the work of God's Messiah was to enter into suffering and death to break the powers of evil, before finally triumphing in the glory of new life.

This is what he taught the disciples: 'The Son of Man is to be delivered into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed he will rise again'. This is now the second time that Jesus makes this stark prediction. He is to be betrayed—the Greek word *paradidomai* literally means 'to be handed over'—into human hands. And those people will crucify him. Jesus will be delivered up and die. His followers will be delivered up and die. And the disciples were too afraid to ask what it was that he meant: 'they did not understand what he was saying', we read. This news was too troubling, too challenging. And rather than ask Jesus about these dark predictions, they argued among themselves.

At Jesus' home in Capernaum, their teacher asks them, 'what were you arguing on the way?' What did you talk about? And again, they remain silent. This time not out of fear, but because they are embarrassed. They had been talking about who among them was the greatest. If Jesus was the Messiah, the promised king of Israel, then what would be the ranking of Jesus' court, his disciples. Would greatness be accorded in terms of length of service—Andrew and Peter first, then James and John? Or would greatness be measured in terms of blood-relationships—Jesus' brothers first: James the Just, Joseph, Simon the Zealot and Jude? You can see how establishing the rankings at this Messianic court would keep eight men quite busy. And the remaining four would have their own views, surely, as to how to measure their own greatness. Was not Nathaniel the first to have understood that Jesus was 'Son of God and king of Israel'? Surely that would count for something.

Jesus calls them all together. And tells them that the Messianic kingdom is not one of pomp and might, of greatness or precedence. This king would reign by being a servant. And so would they. 'Whoever wants to be first must be the last of all and servant of all'. Those who serve others in humility, who welcome others with generosity, are first in Jesus' court. Those who welcome the weak, are first in Jesus' kingdom. And he takes a child, places his arms around her protectively, and puts her right in their midst to make this point. The servant of all, the protector and welcomer of the weakest, is the greatest. And in this acted-out parable—child in their midst to remind them of their own need for humility—Jesus turns upside down the values of his own contemporary world, for whom a child would have been the least important, and teaches his disciples to learn what true leadership looks like. True leadership lies in serving others, in humbling oneself. True leadership lies turning on their head the values and powers of the world, and by humble and grace-filled acts of service showing them to be power-less. Yes, 'the Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands and they will kill

him'. But 'three days after being killed he will rise again'. In the weakness of the Messiah's death lies his power. In the catastrophe of the cross lies its triumph. And the same is true for the disciples.

One of those disciples, one of the contenders for greatness in their imagined Messianic court, was James the Just. As the oldest brother of Jesus he might well have imagined himself first in line for the second throne in the argument about who might take the seats of power in the Messianic administration. Our second lesson, from the epistle of James, shows us that James had taken his brother's words that true greatness lies in humility and acts of gracious service to heart. People who are truly wise, and truly leaders, show their wisdom by their meekness and the good fruits their lives bring forth. 'If you humble yourself', James will write a couple of verses after our lesson ends, 'God will exalt you' (Jas 4.10). The kind of arguing that the disciples themselves had engaged in on their way to Capernaum, James later came to understand, is futile. Selfish ambition, a quality that motivated their argument on the way, leads to bitter envy, and both have their source not in wisdom but in its exact opposite: misguided and evil thinking. 'Such "wisdom" does not come from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish' (Jas 3.13).

The qualities of a Christian who aspires to greatness, James tells us, are reflecting the values of Jesus' Messianic kingdom. The place where the weak and vulnerable are embraced and placed at the heart of a caring, welcoming community. And the values of that kingdom are not the values of the world. Importance in Christ's kingdom is measured in terms of kindness and not of power, of generosity and not of affluence. As James puts it, starkly: 'whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God'. The values of Jesus are not aligned with the values of the world, and therefore true greatness lies in great humility, not great power. From this insight, James tells us, flow a number of important obligations for the Christian community. Earlier in his epistle, James had told his readers that they should guard their tongue, be watchful about what they say, in case their incendiary talk sets alight a whole bushland, as arson does during the bushfire season. Now James unpacks his injunction further.

The wisdom of knowing what is divisive and what makes for peace and unity, is what lies at the heart of building the kingdom of Christ. True wisdom is shown forth by true welcome. True wisdom is not partial, certainly not hypocritical. True wisdom is shown in acts of service and love. James realises that these qualities need to be nurtured, and that we are unable in our own strength to attain them. Only by walking closely with Christ, only by relying on the power of the Holy Spirit may we gain the kind of wisdom that leads to the kinds of actions that build up the Messianic kingdom in our own time. 'God yearns jealously for the Spirit to dwell in us', James reminds us. God aids us in our weakness by sending his Holy Spirit, and supports us in our actions on his behalf by gifting us his grace: 'God gives all the more grace'. He puts down, even opposes the proud, James tells. But he gives grace to the humble. And in the power of that grace, God's people find wisdom to make good choices. Wise choices. Because the wisdom that comes from God enables his people to live less selfishly, live more truthfully, live more peacefully. 'The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy, without a trace of party spirit or hypocrisy' we are exhorted (Jas 3.17).

This wisdom from God, the gifts of the Spirit of God, may counter the factiousness of our own age. The fruits of the Spirit of God, our patron St Paul reminds us, run counter to the fruits of the world: 'enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, party spirit, dissension, schism' (Gal 5.20). The wisdom of God enables us to see that true greatness lies in humility, and true peace is found where people shun and prevent conflict by their peaceable actions. 'A harvest of righteousness is sown by those who make peace', our epistle tells us. Rightness with God, our being part of the kingdom of God, is sown and harvested only in peace. 'Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you'. Those who seek and promote God's peace will find themselves more at peace in their own lives, and will find that they are enabled to sow in their own communities the seeds of peace that may, with God's grace, grow to be a harvest of righteousness.

I love the epistle of James, because it shows what can happen when you deeply and seriously take to heart Jesus' teaching. James was there when Jesus taught them about humility in the house in Capernaum, when in this lived parable, he placed a child among them and said that those who

wanted to be first needed first to learn loving service to the least. That those who welcomed one as vulnerable and power-less in the eyes of the world as a child—someone who is under the guardianship of a parent, who has limited legal rights until they reach majority— welcomed Christ himself. James learnt what was needed for true greatness: selfless servanthood, a love of peace, a love of the little ones who are so often overlooked. And not only that: but an active turning away from party politics and selfish ambition. That is not the natural way of things. That is not the way of our society. And as such it is not easy to live in a way that is ambitious for peace and for a whole community, rather than is ambitious for self and our own particular tribe. But that is what discipleship is all about, and that is why discipleship is costly.

As he taught his brother and the other disciples, Jesus reminded them that in the eyes of the world he would be regarded as nothing—‘betrayed into human hands, and killed’. His crucifixion would be regarded as a catastrophe by his followers, and an irritation or irrelevance by his captors. But at the end, the upside-down values of his Messianic kingdom would triumph. ‘Three days after being killed, he will rise again’. James followed the crucified Messiah into death. James became the leader of the Jerusalem church and built there the community of believers that has passed on to us the good news of Jesus. Thirty years after the resurrection, the Roman-Jewish historian Josephus reports, James was stoned at the command of the same religious authorities that brought his brother to the cross. His two-fold witness—that of his writings, and that of his being transformed by the power of the teachings of Jesus in living out in his own life and death the values of Jesus’ kingdom—remains with us as encouragement for our own journeys of discipleship. True greatness, James has shown in his writings and his death, lies in drawing near to God so that others may also come close to God, lies in sowing peace by our actions, so that a harvest of righteousness may abound.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, you taught us
that when we welcome the lowliest
we welcome you, and that true greatness lies
in our showing loving and humble service:
gift us the grace of your Holy Spirit that,
in our own journeys of discipleship
we may be ambitious for gentleness and peace,
mercy and good works, unity and community.
Now use us, and our gifts in your service,
to bring forth the harvest of righteousness and peace
you set against the conflicts and disputes of this world.
For you are alive, and reign,
with the Father and the Spirit,
one God forever and ever. Amen.