

# **“Who is the Greatest?”**

a sermon preached on the

## **16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

20 September 2009

at

### **St Luke's in the City, Christchurch**

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Lecture: Mark 9: 30-37

In today's society, we tend to define and evaluate people in terms of the job they do. There is something more important than the occupation, position or title, and that is the kind of person behind the job.

The mistake the disciples made, was to put the position first. In their eyes, the greatest among them, was the one who had the highest position. They each wanted to get a top job, but Jesus told them that his kingdom was not about seeking honour and glory for oneself, but about serving others.

There is nothing wrong with being ambitious; to have goals; to want to be good at what one does and to succeed in it, but ambition must not get out of hand. It can cause us to forget everything else in life in the pursuit of success.

Therefore, we must be careful of what we are sacrificing in the pursuit to our personal goals. We may be sacrificing our family life, justice, kindness – even life itself. Drive and ambition can cause one to treat other people in a cruel or unjust way.

James and John were driven by selfishness and false ambition. This shows how little they had learned from Jesus. It shows how poor was their understanding of his mission. Jesus did not teach against ambition – he redefined it. For the ambition to rule and lord it over others, he substituted to serve others; doing things for other people. So it is not ambition itself that is being condemned, but false ambition, which is very damaging to the unity of the community.

It springs from jealousy and selfishness, and it can result in all kind of ugly and unseemly behaviour, self interest and creates conflict which often results in painful divisions within a community.

Jesus explained to the disciples that true greatness was to be found in the service of others, especially to the weaker member of the community. To many people it appears to be more attractive to serve those who are higher up on the social ladder. This could earn rewards and give a bit of publicity, which would feed their ego.

The real test is to serve those who are the least, the marginalised – those from whom we don't expect anything in return.

The disciples' misunderstanding of the destiny of Jesus, is shown in their misunderstanding of what it means to be a disciple. How can they follow his way of life, if mentally they have not accepted his values? They are so far removed from the mind of Jesus, that disharmony is still in their community. This was highlighted by James and John arguing about which of them was the greatest.

Jesus uses this occasion of disharmony and selfishness as a lead into one of the most beautiful and tender moments in the Gospel. His lesson is that the first or greatest, according to his mind, is the one who is most unselfish in the interest of serving others:

“Like this”, he says, drawing a little child to him and putting His arms warmly, protectively, about the little one to let God's motherly care and compassion be expressed to others through him.

To be lovingly attentive to the least of our brothers and sisters is the way to follow Jesus.

This applies to all of us. NO ONE is greater than the other.

So let each of us be filled with God's motherly care and compassion, as we reach out to others. Let each of us be able to stand up and say –

“I am here to serve”.

Amen.

References: S. O'Flynn  
F. McCarthy

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