**The Road to Greatness**

**Sermon for Cashmere Presbyterian Church**

**Sunday 19th September 2021**

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**Text: Mark 9:30-37**

*Jesus Speaks Again about His Death*

**30**Jesus and his disciples left that place and went on through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where he was, **31**because he was teaching his disciples: “The Son of Man will be handed over to those who will kill him. Three days later, however, he will rise to life.”

**32**But they did not understand what this teaching meant, and they were afraid to ask him.

*Who Is the Greatest?*

**33**They came to Capernaum, and after going indoors Jesus asked his disciples, “What were you arguing about on the road?”

**34**But they would not answer him, because on the road they had been arguing among themselves about who was the greatest. **35**Jesus sat down, called the twelve disciples, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must place himself last of all and be the servant of all.” **36**Then he took a child and had him stand in front of them. He put his arms around him and said to them, **37**“Whoever welcomes in my name one of these children, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not only me but also the one who sent me.”

**Introduction**

Last Sunday night, Quade Cooper was lining up a kick to win an historic victory for the Wallabies over the Springboks. It was a chance for redemption for a man who had been out of the team for 4 years because of attitude problems. What happened displayed a change of attitude. He says, as he lined up the kick he asked himself did he want to land the goal for his own ego or for the team. 4 years ago it would have been for ego, this time it was for the team! And he attributed his change of attitude to the fact that Sonny Bill Williams took him into his home 4 years ago, when he was at his lowest ebb. He says he learnt lessons about life then that changed his attitude. It was a change from being ‘all about me’ to it being all about the team! It was a great change!

This story leads well into the text for today. The disciples clearly had ego problems, arguing amongst themselves about positioning in the coming kingdom. Jesus takes them aside and works on their attitude issues!

I think there is a generic lesson here about allowing Jesus to sit with us and work on our issues, and a particular lesson about the road to greatness.

1. **Allowing Jesus to sit with us**

The encounter here between the disciples and Jesus has powerful potential application for our walk with Jesus.

Firstly, Jesus here was forsaking his popular ministry with the crowds to focus on giving time to shape the lives of a few – his disciples. He was withdrawing from the whirlwind of activity to equip and empower and teach these key players in the future of his kingdom. Are you a disciple of Christ? If you have made a decision to become a Christian, then you are! Therefore, Jesus wants to draw you and I aside to spend individual time working with us, shaping us, helping us to become more Christ-like.

Secondly, while Jesus came with a clarity of insight about what needed addressing, the disciples were more than a little bit evasive. I imagine this is the scene – they are walking along the paths connecting the village in Galilee. I imagine that they were strung out along the path for two reasons: scholars report that the paths were narrow and, secondly, in their culture the rabbi led the way with the others lined up behind. Back in the line the disciples are arguing amongst themselves, and I imagine snippets of conversation float forward to the ears of Jesus. He was getting a sense of the discord.

And then they arrive at Capernaum, go indoors, and Jesus senses the tense mood. He read the room!

So he goes right to the hub of the issue he has discerned – ‘what were you arguing about on the road?’

Their response – shamed silence.

*‘They would not answer him because on the road they had been arguing among themselves about who was the greatest.’*

This is not the first time in this story that they are silent in response to what Jesus says. Earlier, when he talks about his impending death, it says they didn’t understand and were afraid to ask. If the second silence was ‘shamed silence’, I reckon this one is ‘wilful ignorance’. I think they had enough of an idea about what Jesus was saying to know he was describing a pathway of suffering when they had easy glory in mind – Jesus’ words had more than a hint of being a hard road ahead and they didn’t want to know about it!

That makes me think – what are the things that make me want to push Jesus away? Shame about the way I am behaving? Fear that he might be asking too much of me? Or ……?

Despite their evasiveness, Jesus persists!

He sat down, called them to himself. Rabbis sat down when they had important things to teach their disciples. So, he cut through their resistance and, to their credit, they came, they listened, and obviously they remembered (Mark’s gospel is based on Peter’s memory of events).

There is a questions here for you and I revolve around this:-

What are the things that cause me to keep Jesus’ shaping presence in my life at a distance? Shame? Fear? Or……?

If I do allow Jesus to sit with me right now, what would he want to address in me?

The disciples did overcome their shame and fear to let Jesus sit with them. And the issue he addresses was the disconnect in his thinking and their thinking about the road to greatness, or, as one commentator put it, a lesson in compare and contrast based on the uppishness of the disciples and the lowliness of Christ, ambition versus humility (Richard Glover).

1. **Ambition and Humility**

Actually, this lesson Jesus was teaching the disciples was not anti-ambition, it was not anti-greatness. It was, rather, about being ambitious about the true road to greatness and not being sucked into roads that lead to nowhere great!

This is illustrated perfectly by the contrast of understanding about Jesus’ messiahship we talked about last week. The disciples were still thinking in terms of Jesus as a conquering hero, leading a rebellion to unseat the Roman occupiers! And their argument on the road was about cabinet posts in the new regime that would rule Israel, Jesus at the head but who would be his deputy, minister of finance, foreign affairs and so on! This argument had been heightened by the fact that, just before this, Jesus had chosen Peter, John and James to be the special ones to go with him up the Mount of Transfiguration! I am sure this stirred up jealousy and ambition, dissention and argument.

By contrast, Jesus is trying to get it into their heads that his messiahship will be quite different! He has bigger fish to fry than simply the present Roman occupiers. He knew that if it was just about that, the victory would be temporary and fleeting. As we know from Afghanistan, these regimes come and go, one dubious government replaced by another. So, too, the Jews had in succession the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Greeks and now the Romans! Jesus was embarking on a bigger victory, a victory for all people and all time. A victory which would transcend the human governments that come and go. A victory over the common enemies of all humanity – sin, death and evil. And the pathway to the cross, suffering at the hands of sinful humans, the prevalence of evil in that journey and the seeming defeat of death on the cross, all conquered at the point of his resurrection. At that point, sin is dealt to, death overcome, and evil is definitively defeated. These are the big fish he had to fry!

And the context here is relevant – this very passage marks the point where Jesus begins to leave Galilee on the way towards Jerusalem for the last time and the waiting cross. He says, ‘the Son of Man will be *delivered* to those who will kill him.’ The word in Greek for ‘delivered’ is present tense – the delivery has begun. I have ordered a new golf club from the US. I have had a message to say it is on the way, due to arrive on 23rd September. Jesus here is saying ‘I am on my way, due to arrive at Golgotha at the time of Passover!’

And his attitude? Even though he is the Son of God, possessing miraculous powers, he humbles himself, takes the role of a servant to all humanity, allowing himself to be rejected, insulted, tortured and crucified for the benefit of our deliverance from sin, evil and death! And while the pathway is that of a humble, suffering servant, the outcome is great! The impact is world shattering! Jesus is remembered as a humble man who, through servanthood, was elevated to greatness!

So, what does that mean for us? As the Philippians 2 passage says: ‘Our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

He always had the nature of God,  
    but he did not think that by force he should try to remain[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=phil+2&version=GNT#fen-GNT-32423b)] equal with God.  
**7**Instead of this, of his own free will he gave up all he had,  
    and took the nature of a servant.  
He became like a human being  
    and appeared in human likeness.  
**8**He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to death—  
    his death on the cross.  
**9**For this reason God raised him to the highest place above  
    and gave him the name that is greater than any other name.

This is exactly what Jesus sits down to tell the disciples – if first, you must place yourself last and be a servant of all! Then he illustrates it with a child – this is a rich illustration! It is layered with meaning.

So often we like to be seen with the rich and powerful, thinking some of their greatness rubs off onto us in the eyes of others. People cherish and display photos of themselves with great people for this reason. Like the cartoon I cherish, on display in my office, with me in heaven with my golf clubs and Tiger Woods as my caddie! Yet Jesus calls the disciples not to go clamouring after photo-opportunities with the rich and famous, but rather spend the time with people like this child! You see, Jewish society was very structured in terms of who had worth! And children were near the bottom - with the women, sinners and tax collectors! All people shunned by the run-of-the-mill person seeking worldly greatness. All people Jesus was routinely keeping company with! A child has no influence on others, cannot advance a career or lift up prestige, nor give us things, rather, they need us! It is, says William Barclay, ‘Easy to cultivate friendship with those who can be useful to us, and avoid those who need our help.’

Yet Jesus is saying here, as he says repeatedly, that if you welcome and care for the least, like this child, then you are welcoming and caring for me!

Barclay also said:

‘Jesus is not abolishing ambition but, rather, he is recreating it and subliminating it. The ambition to rule is replaced by the ambition to serve. The ambition to have things is replaced with the ambition to do things for others.’

He says that:

‘every economic problem,

every politic problem

every negative conflict

could be solved if people live by what they could do for others rather than what they could get for themselves!’

**Conclusion**

Those disciples sorely needed to get that message, and ultimately they did, resulting in a transformative impact on the society of their day, where the value of humility rose from the nether regions of insult to the definition of true greatness! We, too, are his disciples today, needing to get this message in a way that transforms a society obsessed with fame and power as a pathway to greatness.