

Dreghorn and Springside Parish Church: Sunday 25th April 2021

Bible Reading: Mark 10:32-45

³² Jesus and his disciples were now on the road going up to Jerusalem. Jesus was going ahead of the disciples, who were filled with alarm; the people who followed behind were afraid. Once again Jesus took the twelve disciples aside and spoke of the things that were going to happen to him. ³³ "Listen," he told them, "we are going up to Jerusalem where the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the teachers of the Law. They will condemn him to death and then hand him over to the Gentiles, ³⁴ who will make fun of him, spit on him, whip him, and kill him; but three days later he will rise to life."

³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus. "Teacher," they said, "there is something we want you to do for us."

³⁶ "What is it?" Jesus asked them.

³⁷ They answered, "When you sit on your throne in your glorious Kingdom, we want you to let us sit with you, one at your right and one at your left."

³⁸ Jesus said to them, "You don't know what you are asking for. Can you drink the cup of suffering that I must drink? Can you be baptized in the way I must be baptized?"

³⁹ "We can," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink the cup I must drink and be baptized in the way I must be baptized. ⁴⁰ But I do not have the right to choose who will sit at my right and my left. It is God who will give these places to those for whom he has prepared them."

⁴¹ When the other ten disciples heard about it, they became angry with James and John. ⁴² So Jesus called them all together to him and said, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the heathen have power over them, and the leaders have complete authority. ⁴³ This, however, is not the way it is among you. If one of you wants to be great, you must be the servant of the rest; ⁴⁴ and if one of you wants to be first, you must be the slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life to redeem many people."

Sermon "The way up is down"

Now, I don't like naming names and pointing fingers, but there is someone in my family who is seriously geographically challenged. And just before you wonder, it's not Joanne. They just don't know their ups from and downs, so for instance we've a daughter living in Manchester and I'm told that we cannot wait for her to come down to see us. Or then again, we are always planning to go up to Manchester to see her! Get what I mean?

In 1948 Dr Donald Gray Barnhouse spoke at the Keswick Convention, he looked out at the audience and said, "The way up is down." Dr Barnhouse was not geographically challenged; he was gospel challenged. Having read the gospels, having looked at the life of Jesus, and having witnessed great Christian leaders, he was able to say with authority, "the way up is down."

When Dr Barnhouse's audience looked at him, some may well have thought he had lost his bearings. And I imagine that the disciples on hearing Jesus speak this way, could well have thought the same.

After all, the cultural view of greatness in Jesus' day was not so different from our own today. But Jesus taught and showed an altogether different kind of greatness for his disciples, that is, for us to follow.

In the first verses of today's reading Jesus gives his final and most detailed prediction of what's about to happen to him. He is now setting his face for Jerusalem to confront the temple leaders and as a consequence he will face false arrest, trial, humiliation, mockery, suffering, shame and death on a cross, and then three days later resurrection.

Two of the disciples, James and John pick this time to request privileged places of authority in seats at Jesus' right and left. It does seem as if they have missed the whole trajectory of where this is heading, maybe their heads are in the clouds of the transfiguration rather than down in the gloom of what is immanently about to transpire.

Maybe all they can set their eyes on is the glory that awaits Jesus, and they want to be part of that, they want to cut straight to glory, without the arduous journey.

Jesus softly chastises James and John for their ignorance, he speaks about "the cup" he must drink and "the baptism" he must undergo, he affirms that it is violence and death that awaits him in Jerusalem.

Such is his role; he will die as an utterly despised and powerless "king", at the hands of those who's power and authority he has challenged. And the seats to his right and to his left are not those of opulence, power and prestige, but they are the crosses of others who are crucified, just like him.

Jesus says to James, John and the other disciples, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the heathen have power over them, and the leaders have complete authority." Maybe, he was thinking here of Herod the Great who, feeling threatened slaughtered children to find Jesus when he was just a small boy. Maybe he was thinking of the Temple aristocracy, the chief priest Caiaphas who plotted Jesus' demise, presided over his mock trial, and demanded his death, and maybe he was thinking of Pilate, the Roman overlord who upheld the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome, brutally through intimidation, manipulation, bullying, threat, torture, and crucifixion.

We might look today to the world or our national stage to identify leaders past and present who scheme, manipulate, terrorise, divide and conquer, who think it is all about them and their own ends. Who put personal ambition first. We might even dare look to the church, nationally and locally, and wonder whether some of use misuse power, privilege, force and authority for our own personal gain. We might catch a glimpse of this even in our own homes too. Power and privilege and scheming, bullying and manipulation is very much the way of our world, it is how fallen humanity works. Jesus shows us a very different way. The way to up, to true greatness is down to servant-heartedness.

So, if the way to up is down, then the way to down is up. Because this is not something that comes naturally to us, but it is something that God can do in us. So, we look up to God, to his example and for the Holy Spirit's help and we seek from him a servant heart, a heart that is just like his.

Jesus says, "If one of you wants to be great, you must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, you must be the slave of all."

In absolute contrast to the way the world works, greatness among Jesus' followers is measured by our ability to live as servants and slaves, even if that life means facing oppression at the hands of those who are in power.

So, what does this mean for the church, for our congregation, and for us individual followers of Jesus? I think we do want to be a great Church; I don't think we want to settle for mediocre. I think we do want to be great Christians, not lukewarm and half-hearted.

And so that means in turn - that we follow Jesus as "servants of the rest"; and as "slaves of all".

Our Moderator the Rt Rev Dr Martin Fair was interviewed just recent by the Herald newspaper, I referred to this in last week's service. He spoke boldly on the church having lost our way. He says, "it's absolutely crucial that the position we adopt is one of being on our knees, Jesus came to serve not to be a served". And then he then goes on, "people don't care what you know until they know that you care. Christianity isn't about those who like to sing hymns on a Sunday, it is about being where people are vulnerable, fragile and broken and being alongside them. That's where the church is going, that's the hope for tomorrow, God hasn't given up on Scotland."

Thank you, Martin, and in our heads, we may well applaud such virtue and we may know this to be the right way, but it's one thing knowing and another doing, so what are some of the things that get in the way of us being servant hearted?

Perhaps for you it's fear, that if we you are a servant - and others aren't, then they'll take advantage of your weakness. But look to Jesus, his greatness came through his weakness, God honoured his sacrifice. And it was through self-giving, that not just great things, but God things happened. And rather than fear, we find peace when we are living in the flow of God's will and seeing him going on ahead and shaping a new future and better future.

Perhaps it's your pride: if you give away status or share power with others, then people might think less of you? Or maybe when you give away power then you might be worried that you are less needed by others. But rather than pride, what about being proud of seeing others flourish, become more because of your service. What about also seeing new people coming to faith through your loving Christlike witness.

Along with pride can be arrogance. Maybe you resist servant leadership because there's a tinge of arrogance. Sometimes we think we're the only ones who can do what we do but let me tell you that none of us are irreplaceable. Enabling someone else to do your job is not to invite failure, but to open up new possibility. Imagine Jesus had been arrogant and not trained up his disciples or shared the Holy Spirit – because he did these things God's mission continued.

And finally, there is your own feelings of self-worth that can get in the way of servant heartedness. We attach how we feel about ourselves to the positions we hold, the status, job titles. But you know it is not about us, it is never really about is us - it always about him. About Jesus, and it was Jesus who said, "the Son of Man did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life to redeem many people". And in response we his followers share the praise of the heavenly host sung in Revelation 5:12 "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!" He alone is worthy, we find our worth, we find our purpose in serving and in imitating him, Jesus our servant King.

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25th April 2021