

“Greatness” | Matthew 20:17-28; Galatians 2:11-21

In the past couple of weeks, we have been asking the question, “Is Jesus better?” It might be a no-brainer, “Of course he is!” It might be easy to respond swiftly with our words, but the real question is: is this absolutely true in our hearts? In Jesus’ teaching about children, his encounter with the rich man, and speaking about the grace that is freely given by God to whom he chooses, there is a constant theme that flows through that the disciples seem to consistently miss. While we read about it, we could probably sense that something was coming, and that there was some sort of tension brewing (the disciples being corrected, the rich man being told to sell his possession and give to the poor, and the workers complaining about wages). In today’s passage we realise that the tension was a result of the disciples having a twisted view on what “greatness” is.

I’m sure many of us have fantasised about being great. Whether it is about being a great athlete, influential voice in politics, in business, artist, or a celebrity, people want to be great. We want our voices to be heard, we want our efforts and dedication to our passions and jobs to be recognised. I think sometime what we want from this world and how we want to be viewed by the world is in direct conflict with what Jesus wants from his people, as we will see in today’s passage.

One of the most exciting times of the year I believe is January, because there are school holidays, and their many events that coincide with it. At the moment, arguably the biggest buzz going around in Melbourne at the moment is the classic final match tonight between Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal. These two athletes are revered by many, and are put on a pedestal because of their legendary status. To many people this is greatness. To some people, Steve Jobs’ invention and vision for widely used Apple products, along with Bill Gates’ invention of Microsoft is greatness. Some people will see this year’s Australian of the Year, who was able to — for the first time, restore a quadriplegic man’s ability to walk as greatness. Some people will see Barack Obama’s presidency, especially his effort for new marriage equality laws, as greatness. Usain Bolt, and Michael Phelps at the Olympics, I think you get the picture. In a human perspective, and with in society (first world, privileged) in which we live today, to many people’s eyes this is what we view as being great, and many people work as hard as they can to reach that level of greatness. But what does Jesus say about greatness?

Greatness is not based on achievements and status

I think it is very clear that Jesus has a very different idea of greatness. Despite Jesus’ teaching it is fascinating to see that the disciples still do not understand what Jesus is trying to tell them. In fact, it takes an incident like this to show how little they have grasped the words of Jesus and (to speak to our context) how worldly they are in their thinking. Despite reading in verse 20 that the mother was the one who approached Jesus, Jesus’ response (or rather to whom he directs his response) and Mark’s version of the event gives the impression that it was the pride of the disciples that needed to be addressed. We read in verse 21, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.” In other words, the heart of John and James is to have authority and status that is somewhat equal with Jesus himself. They wanted to be above everyone else, and receive special treatment. The Roman Empire was seen as great because of their dominance and power. They were able to take over most of the countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, they controlled the trade, the religious practices, and had substantial military power that made enemies and the minorities fear the leaders and kings which allowed them to “boss” and “bully” people to get what they wanted. It is the same today with influential people such

as celebrities and “stars” who stand out in the public eye. For some reason they seem to be more special than us, and are at times treated and viewed very different to just an ordinary person. They could use their position to push people to think in a certain way, all so they get their own way. In a way the disciples are wanting the same thing. We realise it is not just James and John that are wanting to be Jesus’ right and left hand, it is all of them. In verse 24 it says, “When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers.” The rest were jealous because they felt it was unfair that James and John got to ask. They wanted the same. They wanted to be seen as being great by being a step above and seen as a class above the rest. The heart of the disciples is filled with pride, and selfishness. Jesus, with just seven words, puts his disciples in their place, “You don’t know what you are asking.” The disciples had no idea what they were talking about because all they were after is to be in a position to have political power, like the Roman Emperors exercising their authority and also be celebrities and stars. Are we like the disciples in the way we view greatness? Is the only way to be seen as “great” is by climbing up the ranks of the church leadership and eventually making your way to be an elder or an influential figure in the church? With some churches in Korea there is an interesting system where a graduate like myself, would start off working in a church as a minister for children at pre-school level, then make their way up the chain — Sunday school, youth group, young adults, then family ministries, then finally make it to be the senior pastor (main speaker). For someone to eventually make it to the ‘top’ is a massive achievement and therefore, they are seen as being greater than ministers who are working in other parts of ministry in the church. But Jesus says, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.” This is the way the world might function, but that is not the way His people should be viewing greatness. The disciples ignored and misunderstood (and we do to) the teachings of Jesus when it was clear that the world sees greatness as achievement, money, influence, and status, but he does not.

Then what is greatness?

Greatness is to Serve

Jesus makes it clear that greatness is about serving, and to lose your life for others. He says to his disciples in verse 23, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.” The word cup is commonly known in the Old Testament to represent judgement and retribution, and anyone who wholeheartedly follows Jesus should be prepared to face opposition and backlash. One of the common misunderstandings of the Christian faith is the belief that once you believe and follow Jesus, everything in your life — all your problems and tests — will be solved or go well. One of my friends in High School once said to me that he was envious of me because of the fact I go to church and in result everything seems fine and good in my life. He wanted the same. This assessment could not be further from the truth. Sure, there might be some things that are less stressful to us because they hold less importance in our lives than those who do not follow Christ, but the idea that things are just going fine because God makes our lives comfortable and easier to live on this earth, nothing could be further from the truth. If these two things: happy, stress free lifestyle and believing God works for the betterment of your life on earth, are the reasons why you are wanting to be a follower of Jesus, you will be greatly disappointed. The seats on the right and left of Jesus were none of the disciples’ concern, nor their business. Likewise, it is none of our concern or business whether we are seen as greatness in the views of the world — making millions of dollars, inventing the next big thing, and having a powerful and influential voice. Our focus and concern should be on the fact that, just like Jesus was condemned, we should be prepared for the judgement that is coming our way because of our faith. We see this already don’t we? The talk of the church being intolerant while

going on about how tolerant they are without realising the fact they are only tolerant to the views that conform to theirs. The political agendas that attempt to drive out Christianity in the education system, and the biased/twisted stories about the church to bring a bad name to it. There is fierce opposition in our neighbourhood, and there the opposition only gets worse for those who are out in the missions field, some facing torture and death because of their faith. In the mist of all this, it says in verse 26, 27, “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.” Greatness is not about exercising authority. It is about serving. One of the more interesting words used here is the word for “servant.” In the KJV the word is used for “deacon” or “minister”, but obviously not in the way the church uses those words today. Those titles have almost become a “badge of honour”¹ in the church, and are viewed a lot of the time as a position of power and authority. It almost seems like the full impact and meaning of the words have been lost. The role of the minister/deacon/elder according to Jesus is not be a leader of “telling people what to do” but rather to be a helper and servant among his people. This would have been a difficult message for the disciples and Christians at the time because the leadership of the Roman Empire view humility and servanthood as naivety and weak. Likewise, today, in our society, it is a difficult message to hear, because it goes against everything we have been taught to live for — satisfying self, reward myself, wanting more, deserving more, being powerful and having strong opinions, etc. The question I want to ask is this: do we mark our standard on which the world has set? Or do we follow Christ wholeheartedly and mark the standard of greatness which He has set?

Jesus is the Greatest

You might be thinking, how on earth are we to live up to these expectations? How do we risk putting ourselves in danger (physically and being abused verbally) to serve as Jesus taught? To us it might seem impossible, and very much is impossible. However, because of Christ, it is possible. I want to read from verse 25, “Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 26 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— 28 **just** as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” The glorious truth is that Jesus is the greatest, and he has set the standard for us to live by. He does not only teach us to live a certain way, but he has shown us he will do this for us also. It is clear when reading verse 28 that Jesus is the greatest because not only did he come to serve, but it is the fact that his perfect servanthood will lead to the salvation for many. Jesus predicted in verse 17-19 that he will set a historical precedent, by going up to Jerusalem, to be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. He was condemned to death and was handed over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. And on the third day he will be raised to life. And that he did. There it is friends, Jesus, the servant, laying down his life in order to give the world what it needs most: **that is greatness**. Through God’s mercy and grace, ordained His only Son be beaten and murdered at the hands of men (sinful men) for the sake of our (mine and your) salvation. We can only do our best to follow the examples of Jesus because Jesus showed us first. Once we were bound by sin, but Jesus has set us free. Galatians 2:19-21, “For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” Friends, there is no merit that we claim to be good enough for God. We are completely and on every level dependant on Him. There is no greatness on this earth that can even be spoken in the same sentence with Jesus’

¹ Said by D. A. Carson

greatness. The reason why we can serve in the example of Jesus is not because we are capable, but it is because he has freed us from the bondage of sin — which has told us that he should only live for ourselves, spoil ourselves, and again humility and service — so that we do not live for ourselves, but for Christ.

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