

This morning Jesus turns our notions of greatness on their head. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

He says.

And ‘Welcome those who seem least deserving of our love and attention.

Recently I found this saying. Leadership is not about being the best. Leadership is about making everyone else better. It puts today’s message in a nutshell.

To suit our Gospel we could substitute the word ‘greatness’ for ‘leadership’ and say:

‘Greatness is not about being the best.

Greatness is about making everyone else better.’

I think that is what Jesus was saying.

The focus of the great is not on oneself, not on being the best.

The focus is on others and making them better. That is what

Jesus did. In the words we hear at our Eucharist

‘He healed the sick and ate and drank with outcasts and sinners, he opened the eyes of the blind and proclaimed the good news of your kingdom to the poor and to those in need.’ Why did he do this? Our service words tell us ‘In all things he fulfilled God’s gracious will.’ He made everyone else better because that is God’s wish.

God loves us, desires nothing more than our happiness, and wills the healing of our disease.

This is the radical grace of God. Jesus proclaims it and lives it. It is so different from the way people had understood God - they can’t grasp it. Jesus proclaims the forgiveness of sins because that is God’s nature,... to forgive.

Jesus knows the disciples have been arguing amongst themselves about who was the ‘greatest’. So he seizes it as a ‘teaching moment’.

He sits down, a sign the rabbi was ready to teach. He calls the twelve to sit around him. Then he makes a pronouncement “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” You can almost see the disciples’ troubled frowns, their heads shaking...they are perplexed. What is he talking about? To illustrate his point, Jesus brings in a little child, a little child whom he takes into his arms...a profound gesture of welcome. Welcome one of these, he says, and you welcome God himself...

Jesus is saying ‘greatness is not about you and your achievements. Greatness depends on how you relate to the ‘non-great’, such as this child.’

Your greatness depends on how you relate to the ‘non-great’. Jesus is saying the truly great person recognizes value in the least likely people...

the dirty, the un-co-operative, the weak and the ugly.

The great person can see the diamond in the rough.

Our appreciation of this Gospel deepens if we understand the position of children in society at the time of Jesus. Children were not favoured and doted on as they are today. In ancient Middle Eastern cultures, the child placed last in importance. The medieval Mediterranean theologian Thomas Aquinas taught that in a raging fire, a husband was obliged to save first his father, then his mother, next his wife, and last of all his young child. In times of famine, children would be fed last, after the adults. Such priorities are still common in many non-Western cultures. Only after reaching maturity was the child recognized as a free person with rights to inherit the family estate.

In this cultural situation, where the child’s status is so low, it’s existence hardly recognized; Jesus’ statements are radical. It is

remarkable for a rabbi to take a child in his arms in the presence of his disciples— an unusual and striking gesture.

"To 'welcome' or 'receive' ...means to be concerned about, to care for, to show kindness to.

To do so in the name of Jesus means having learned it from Jesus.

To be great, Jesus says, is to welcome and embrace these little ones of next to no value as if they are God himself. To be great is to make those on the margins feel better. To be great is to bring to the centre those it would be easy to overlook. To be great is to serve those no one else would serve, recognizing their worth as equal to ours.

Christ calls us to greatness through the gesture of welcome, the open arms. Christ calls us to love the unlovely. Christ calls us to be servant leaders.

We at St James have begun this concern, this care, this kindness to those on the margins...focusing on those who would be easy to overlook. Four years ago we began to provide a monthly free breakfast at St George's Anglican church. It's just down the road, really...2.2 km from here. Before COVID we served a hot breakfast on the second Sat of each month. We always had lots of volunteers...from St Andrew's and St Philip's too. It was kind of fun...upbeat...chit chat went on. We served boiled eggs, toast, porridge, cold cereal, bananas, juice, coffee and tea. Since last March due to COVID, the breakfast is in a brown bag...a boiled egg, yogourt, juice box, granola bar, sometimes an apple or a banana. Now we bring clothing to give away...socks, hats, hoodies. It all goes. At Christmas, each person got a \$5 Tim Horton's gift card. Yesterday we gave out 45 brown bags and we ran out. There is a need.

Recently St George's took over serving a cold breakfast Mon to Fri after the Salvation Army stopped. They also offer showers and clothes washing facilities Mon to Friday mornings. The 'ambiance' around St George's is changing. Marginalized people sit on the steps...or on the grass. . But is this not Christ, through his church, responding to his invitation to greatness by serving those no one else would serve, recognizing their worth as equal to ours.

Is welcoming also begging the Lord for grace to see good in the person you have found annoying for years? Or the person who hurt you a long ago? Or let you down?

Welcoming is seeing the Lord in the individuals whose 'differentness' stands out like a sore thumb.

Welcoming is seeing the Lord in the ones always picked last on the playground.

Jesus calls us into service with those who lack status. It's not about you and me and our positions, or our rightness. It's all about them and their need. This is surely the essence of the Gospel and there is the essence of greatness in the God's eyes. Remember that CEO who took a pay cut so he could pay all his employees a minimum wage of \$70,000? His name is Dan Price. Here's what happened next:

"Six years later after the decision that others said would destroy his business, Dan Price reports that revenue has tripled, the customer base has doubled, 70% of his employees have paid down debt, many bought homes for the first time, 401(k) contributions grew by 155% and turnover dropped in half. His business is now a Harvard Business School case study."

In his own words:

“6 years ago today I raised my company's min wage to \$70k. Fox News called me a socialist whose employees would be on bread lines.

Since then our revenue tripled, we're a Harvard Business School case study & our employees had a 10x boom in homes bought. Always invest in people.”

To make the new numbers work, he realized he would have to make the same as his lowest paid employees. So he cut his own salary from \$1.1 million US a year, down to \$70,000.

So we have this to think on. Among us here today are ‘the great’ as well. Each one of us is called to ‘greatness’. Maybe not on the scale, but in our daily lives, in the choices we make. Let us remember our Lord’s outstretched arms and his gesture of profound welcome! Let us remember that

Greatness is not about being the best.

Greatness is about making everyone else better Amen