

DATE: Sunday September 19, 2021

CHURCH: St Matthew's Kensington.

SERMON SERIES. Lectionary Gospel Readings

BIBLE PASSAGE: Mark 9:30-37

GENERAL THEME/TOPIC: A child in the midst

Baptism on Christopher Harris

I wonder what your definition of “greatness” is. We can define it by using synonyms such as power, achievement, influence, status, wealth. It’s interesting to look back over history and remind ourselves of some of the great civilisations and great leaders, and ask “Where are they now?” The Pharaohs of ancient Egypt. Where are they now? Alexander the Great who wept because there were no more lands to conquer. Where is he now? Pol Pot who held Cambodia in his iron grip and squashed any and all opposition to his hold on power. Where is he now? Adolf Hitler with his idiosyncratic of racial supremacy and racial purity. Where is he now? Mostly these people and the civilisations they founded are in glass cabinets in museums.

Jesus Christ had a most revolutionary theory about greatness. His theory was that greatness is achieved through suffering ... that greatness consists not in being served but in serving others ... and that an example of greatness is not a powerful conqueror, but a humble, simple child. And where do you find the evidence of Jesus Christ’s teachings now? Not in a museum cabinet, but in every country of the world today, in every national culture, rehearsed in thousands of languages, alive and well and dynamic and contributing to the world and its peoples. Jesus Christ’s revolutionary theory about greatness has stood the test of time, has even overcome the forces that have tried to stamp it out, and is current in the world today.

Jesus’ revolutionary theory about greatness is seen in our Gospel reading for today – a reading that happens to be most appropriate for a baptism, and for the baptism of Christopher Harris. There are three facets of Jesus’ revolutionary theory – Suffering Greatness; Serving Greatness; Childlike Greatness. Let’s have a brief look at each.

1.SUFFERING GREATNESS. This really is an oxymoron. How ever can you have “suffering greatness”? It’s difficult, but it is what Jesus said. In last week’s gospel reading, when Jesus asked his disciples what people were saying about him, as part of his teaching Jesus told his disciples that part of following him was self-denial, and talking up their cross and following him. Not only is that tantamount to saying that they *had to be prepared* to suffer for him and his cause, but we had the roll-call of 10 of the 12 disciples who *really did suffer* for him, and were martyred.

Were these men regarded as having achieved greatness through suffering for Jesus and for the gospel? Well, frankly, yes. Peter is honoured and revered in Rome where he was martyred. Thomas is honoured in India where he was martyred, and especially in the Mar Thoma Church in that country. Andrew is honoured in Greece where he was martyred. “Suffering Greatness” is a revolutionary sort of theory of greatness, and it is oxymoronic. But it has proved to be true.

We aren’t called on much to suffer in 21st century Australia as Christians. We are the butt of jokes by stand-up comedians especially because of the moral demands of what we believe; maybe we are ignored and given the cold social shoulder because of our faith; maybe people withdraw from us because they don’t share the things we believe. We ought not to be surprised at any of this, for we are simply walking in the steps of Jesus and of countless other

Christian people who also have faced discrimination because of what they have believed. It's a soft version of "Suffering Greatness." (584)

2. SERVING GREATNESS. This is also an oxymoron. Surely greatness is evidenced by the great person being served. As the disciples had been walking along they had been discussing among themselves who of them was the greatest – the most important. Shades of the boxer Muhammad Ali – "I am the greatest!" And where is **he** now? But in our gospel reading Jesus said, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35). This contains shades of the processions in great Anglican cathedrals where the Bishop comes at the end of the procession - last of all - not because he or she is the most important, but because he or she is the most humble!

Real greatness, Jesus said, is getting up from your carver chair at the dining table and serving the meal to others. Real greatness, Jesus said, is shown not in having your feet washed by a household servant, but is shown in washing the feet of all the others in the room yourself.

In the baptism service, it is promised that the person to be baptised will "reject selfish, living, and all that is false and unjust" – in other words, will put "serving greatness" into practice. And here's a practical thought, anyone who serves us is demonstrating Jesus' revolutionary theory of "serving greatness" – the person who serve us at the supermarket ... the plumber who fixes our drains ... the cleaner who tidies up after us. Let us hold them in honour because their service reminds us of Jesus' teaching and example of serving greatness.

3. CHILDLIKE GREATNESS. In order to reinforce his point, Jesus put a child in the middle of the group of 12 greatness-discussing disciples, took the child in his arms, and said, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." (Mark 9:37). (888)

A child wasn't great ... a child isn't great ... hasn't achieved anything ... hasn't contributed much ... is more of a consumer than a provider. But what a superb visual aid for Jesus' teaching about revolutionary greatness theory! A child ... young ... naïve ... lacking worldly wisdom ... but is the very image of Jesus., "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." It's as though Jesus was saying, "Don't be fooled by the outward appearance. Weakness is not the same as powerlessness; apparent unimportance is not the same as lack of status. Innocence does not mean no greatness. If you receive a child, you receive me." There is such a thing as childlike greatness.

And this is exactly why it is so important for us as a congregation to have a Baptism service as the central feature of our regular Sunday worship time. Once young Christopher has been baptised with water, listen to the words that you and I as congregation members will address to him. "We therefore *receive* and welcome you ..." Jesus said, "Whoever receives a child in my name receives me." We say "We receive and welcome you..." In receiving young Christopher in Jesus' name, we are receiving Jesus in all the smallness and youth, and naivety and innocence and powerlessness of Christopher. What a privilege for us as a congregation. What a joy for us as a congregation. What an enrichment for us as a congregation.

And do you know what the name "Christopher" mean? Its Greek form is Christophoros, Χριστοφορος and it means "the bearer of Christ" – from the Greek words Χριστος and φερω. And in a very special way today, as we have thought about Jesus' revolutionary theory of greatness, young Christopher is the bearer of Christ to us as we receive and welcome him.

Suffering greatness ... serving greatness ... childlike greatness ... let us lay to heart what we have learned about Jesus' revolutionary theory of greatness today, and as we are able, put it into practice in our lives.