

Sunday between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> October [27]

Luke 17: (1-4) 5-10

When it comes to greatness and how society views others, it is clear that a person will be congratulated and elevated due to their success, be that financial success, academic success, professional success and other tangible signs that their life is more comfortable and secure than others. When it comes to climbing the social ladder, no one strives to be at the bottom, serving everybody else. Greatness is climbing to the top. Greatness is how many people you have answering to you. Greatness is power. Greatness is sitting in the board room and telling someone, "You're fired."

But God has an upside-down approach to life. God has set up a spiritual kingdom in an upside-down sort of way. God loves to contradict how our world thinks. In God's upside-down kingdom, the greatest person is not the person who is at the top, who is in charge of everyone else and can tell everyone else what to do. In God's kingdom, the greatest person is one who is at the bottom. It's the one who has the most people over them, who answers and serves everyone. In God's kingdom, that's greatness.

Doesn't that seem strange? It must have seemed strange to Jesus' disciples when they heard the gospel reading for today. They had a completely different picture of "greatness." They believed, just like everybody else, that Jesus had come into the world to help the Jews overthrow the Roman government. Someday, Jesus would re-establish the glorious kingdom of Israel, and he would be in charge, and we, the twelve apostles, would be at his side. We're going to be the twelve vice presidents. We're going to be in charge of everybody. So why was Jesus so concerned with servants and their role?

Later in his ministry Jesus went on to demonstrate that even he was not going to avoid the duties of a servant, he would model the role of servant king, he would sit amongst sinners, touch the untouchables and wash his disciples' feet! For today, Jesus is explaining that living faith filled lives is not going to be something that appeals to the world and is not something we should be looking to in order to receive praise. When we understand our relationship with God it is not simply our duty to serve, it is our joy also.

Jesus is trying so very hard to help his disciples to understand what faith is in an environment where they were used to their relationship with God being moderated by the law. In the law there was room for status and social greatness. In the law there was provision made with the assumption that there would be free people and slaves in unequal relationships, there would be Jews and gentiles separated by rules and regulations. Jesus came to teach what living by faith might look like, and it looks amazing! To have faith the size of a mustard seed is enough to move a mulberry tree into the sea, this is impressive stuff. To live by faith is to be in a position of power.

Yet, after describing the power of a faith filled life, Jesus makes it clear that what his disciples will do in response to their faith would be nothing like the use and abuse of power seen in wider society. Not only will those who live by faith live lives of service, that service will not be rewarded or acclaimed, rather it will be as though these disciples are slaves among the people, doing their duty and seeing it not as an offering or a gift for which they should receive thanks, but merely as the fulfilment of their relationship with God. It fulfils our relationship with God because God has already served us, God has already set us the example, we serve because we have been served.

That's why we worship God, not because God is so great, in a general, "big-God" sort of way. We worship God because the word of God incarnate came to earth and came to us to serve us as our Saviour. And today, Jesus invites us to pursue greatness his way. If you want to be great, Jesus says, then be someone's servant. Put yourself below someone else. Tie a child's shoe – that's greatness. Serve the people living in your home. Serve the people who attend here at church – there are all kinds of ways. Give of your time, talents and resources

for the good of others. That's what this whole idea of stewardship is about, understanding what wonders God has done for us and continues to do and responding to it as we see fit.

If we recognise God's upside-down approach to loving us by responding with an hour on a Sunday and the loose change from the bottom of our pocket at the end of the week, we surely don't do God justice. If, however, we respond to God's unbelievable tendency to put us, even us, by grace in a place where we receive God's blessing, with actions of deliberate service and charity in God's name then surely we have understood what it means to be counter-cultural in God's upside down world view. Do we dare to put ourselves below other people? Will we be like Christ that way? It might not look very "great" in the eyes of the world, but who cares what the world thinks. We are called to be servants, humble, lowly, kind, and gentle servants to others, just as Christ has been to us. This is how we live by faith, this is how we share that faith in our actions.

And when it's hard to know how to attain greatness in the eyes of God, remember this prayer of Saint Ignatius of Loyola;

Teach us, good Lord,  
to serve you as you deserve,  
to give and not to count the cost,  
to fight and not to heed the wounds,  
to toil and not to seek for rest,  
to labour and not to ask for any reward,  
save that of knowing that we do your will. Amen.