Scripture reading

Today our reading is from Luke ch 9: 43-51.

Reading: **Lk 9:43-51**

But while they were all marveling at everything he was doing, Jesus said to his disciples, “Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.” But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask *him* about this saying.
An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side and said to them, “Whoever receives this *child* in *my* name receives *me*, and whoever receives *me* receives him who *sent* me. For he who is *least* among you all is the one who is *great*.”
John answered, “Master, we saw someone casting out *demons* in *your* name, and we tried to stop him, because *he* does *not* follow with *us*.” But Jesus said to him, “Do not stop him, for the one who is not *against* you is *for* you.” As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.

Prayer

Introduction

Do you know the show “Britain’s got talent”? I occasionally enjoy recordings of it by skimming youtube, guided usually by selecting the sequels that attracted the largest number of viewers. It is quite amazing.

In this show, there is a live audience of thousands of cheering viewers, and a jury of three judges who will give their verdicts such as “phenomenal”, “never seen anything like it”, “I couldn’t take my eyes off you” “you ARE ravishing” and so forth in a competition of dancers and singers of all ages. The big price is that the annual winner gets the privilege to perform before Her Majesty the Queen herself.

Remember, it’s not a cooking show…

What I find most interesting – besides the performances, of course – is that the candidates are asked before their spiel what *their dream* is. There are all sorts of clever answers, but the red line that connects them all is invariably the dream for greatness and glory. For example, there is this cute 10 year old girl who makes no secret that she wants to be a star - in her own words: a diva. And then she goes on to prove that she already has the voice it takes to get there! Truly amazing.

I think our story today speaks about why it is important that we understand the desire for greatness and how to deal with it in our own heart.

So what I am going to say, I have entitled:

Dealing with your desire for greatness

Let's first examine why you actually need to

1) *Know* your desire for greatness

Let's consider for a moment the circumstances in which these events took place. Picture yourself among a crowd of people who already followed for some time this Jewish rabbi Jesus and his students, the 12 disciples. These trainees had been chosen by Jesus himself to pass on his teaching after his departure. So they are the ones who would later be responsible for what will become of the future church in the millennia to come, for the better or worse.

Three of them - John, James and Peter - just recently had been taken by Jesus to a mountain top to pray, but then had probably the most frightening experience of their life when they all of a sudden saw Jesus change, and lighting up - surrounded by two other guys whom they somehow recognized as the two eminent prophets of Old Testament times, Moses and Elijah. By all accounts, this must have been a shocking, but unforgettable event. And shortly before and after, equally stunning, unprecedented miraculous signs took place, such as the feeding of thousands of people by a handful of bread and fish, or the casting out of an evil spirit that plagued a child with horrible screams and seizures who had defied everybody.

As a result, all were amazed then at the greatness of God (Lk 9:43).

It is not surprising that the disciples' imaginations and expectations at this point were flying higher than ever. They were confident now that the dream and ancient promise of a messianic era would very soon be fulfilled by Jesus, when he would restore Israel and usher in world-wide justice and prosperity.

It is at this moment that Jesus begins to announce that God's way of fulfilling this promise was different from what the disciples thought it should be. So just when the disciples dream of the glory of political power, Jesus makes his next strategic move to inform them that he will be - betrayed and killed.

They could not grasp this, "it was hidden from them". Blinded by the appeal of their own dream of power and glory, they could not see or appreciate God's plan. To them, it simply made no sense. The only thing they understood was that they didn't understand.

This is actually a good place to start. Luke takes the reader to the same point by showing what the disciples were doing at that time: That day, probably on their way home, they engaged in an untimely argument about who among them would become the greatest. They dreamed of their influence and the associated prestige as advisors of Jesus when he would be king.

> Not many among you may share precisely the same dream today. But one way or another we all share a dream of personal greatness. What might be yours? -

> And where do you think this universal desire for greatness actually comes from? Is it good or bad? Is it a choice or fate? Or is it simply a biological necessity?
>
> Isn't it remarkable, our desire for praise? Probably nothing comes close in power to motivate people to excell, to constantly improve, or to even sacrifice their own lifes on behalf of others.
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> But where does it come from? It seems that other species do their daily work and select their leaders or queens just fine even without brains that long for praise. I cannot picture the spider who masterfully weaves her perfect web dreaming of praise. It is not common in the animal kingdom to invent medals and distinctions and to desire them.

Here is something so basic, so defining of all we do, and yet so distinctly human: We long to be great! We long to compete, not simply to be the best, no! But to be seen as the best! In every sports turnament, in every championship! And in every good story, we are in suspense until we know how the hero gets the glory.

If you think about it, isn't that actually quite odd? And what's even more puzzling: It seems we are not entirely comfortable with our own desire for greatness either. Something apparently informs us that not all is right.

From Luke, we simply hear that "Jesus knew their thoughts", but the book of Mark gives us a few more details. In Mark 9:33, we hear that when they arrived back home after a long day's work, Jesus asked them what they had been arguing about. And what did they answer ? Mark says: "They kept quiet, because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest".

In other words, the disciples were ashamed of themselves. They had enough light to see that something about themselves was foul. Though they longed for greatness, their own consciences accused them for doing so.

It's bizarre, but that is how we are. Jesus knows. Now, I want you to see that Jesus does not sanction or sanitize our natural longing for superiority. He does not say "sure, follow your instincts; go on and realize your great potential, don't feel bad about that!".

But neither does he say "you are bad; as my disciples, you surely must no longer dream of greatness!".

No! He knows what is in the heart. He knows how we were created, and what we have become. He knows that even our first parents already had this longing for greatness from the beginning. Or if it were not so, how could Satan's lie in the garden of Eden have appealed to them? If they were not created with a desire for greatness, how could the thought that they would become like God himself have tempted them in the first place ?

I would go even further: The very fact that God created us with a desire for praise shows that God must take great pleasure in seeing our desire for glory satisfied – though in his way, by winning his praise and not merely the praise of men. In his way – that is not by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, but by eating from a tree of life. Of life that cannot be found anywhere else than in Jesus.

This is what the rest of our story is about – how, after becoming part of the body of Jesus, how his people are supposed to find true greatness.

So after we recognized our desire for greatness, I next want you to think about this:

2) True greatness consists in humility

Luke sums up the Christian teaching on this matter in one memorable, simple word so typical of Jesus: "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all – he is the greatest."

Let's try to unpack this a little. Who is this child ? What does it mean to welcome such a child ? What makes the receiving of this child equal to receiving God ?

I don't think Jesus has in mind the adoption of orphans, even though adopting an orphan may be a good thing. In any case, being a foster parent can no more make you a Christian than any other good deed. There have been many kind people who adopted abandoned children, but without taking the least interest in anything related to Christ, his word, the gospel, faith or salvation. You cannot become a child of God or receive his Holy Spirit by anything you do. The only way to become a Christian is by trusting in what he has already done for you – to believe that he obeyed God to make good for our disobedience; that he offered himself up and died in our place to bear the punishment that we deserved.

So what else is in view here? Upon closer examination, it turns out that the "welcoming" or "receiving" a child as a metaphor for humility is actually a prominent theme in the Bible. I don't know where it might appear first, but I would not be surprised if Jesus had in mind the opening line of a song he might have just meditated on. Maybe he thought of his upcoming betrayal that day when meditating on Psalm 41, because Ps 41:9 states: "Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me". According to Jn 13:18, Jesus clearly understood this as a prediction of his own betrayal. If this psalm was on his mind, we might understand why he chose a child to explain who is the greatest among his disciples, because psalm 41 starts with a blessing of those who properly relate to the needy: "O the happiness of him who is acting wisely unto the poor, in a day of evil Jahweh delivers him".

Clearly, this blessing is not restricted to a literal adoption of a child or of any other victim of poverty. In fact, in many other instances, the receiving of a child in the NT is a metaphor for Christians of accepting one another.

Luke himself does not give a more detailed explanation. Perhaps he trusted that the reader will have sufficient understanding, and that especially Matthew had already explained this at length in an entire parallel chapter, since Matthew ch18 addresses in greater detail what we are talking about: How we ourselves are to become like children, how the church must separate itself from those who lead such little ones into sin; how sin in the community of such child-like believers is to be addressed; and how we can and must forgive one another.

In other words, instead of descending in carnal powerplay and infights over influence, the disciples need to learn from these teachings how to preserve the bond of fellowship in humility.

HUMILITY. That does not mean we must altogether renounce or deny our desire for greatness. This would not be possible anyway. But Jesus redefines what greatness is. His followers must renounce the world's standards of greatness and instead aspire for true greatness – greatness that consists in serving the lowly and outcast by associating and identifiying with them in genuine humility.

I don't suggest we should all become Mother Theresa. But what I have in mind begins here and now in small things. It's about how we relate to existing, real people in our lives, our attitudes at home, in school, at work, in church – everywhere. We must examine ourselves: Are we arrogant prigs? Or have we set our minds on regarding others more highly than ourselves?

As Christians, we will care because Jesus gives us a new definition of greatness. Fellowship with Him gives you a heart that does not long to put others down, but that longs to welcome others into the community and to see them do well.

Another place where this is described in the NT is in Romans 15:5-8 which states "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

And in chapter 14 (Ro 14:1-4): As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

This brings me to my last point, namely that:

3) Christians must not confuse greatness with looking down on others

We may wonder how the preceding topic prompted the response from John in v49: "Master, we saw a man driving out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us"

Was John convicted by the present teaching of Jesus about humility ? Did he recognize that a certain arrogance made him judge the other fellow too harshly for not joining their own little circle?

-- -- Or did he rather seek to defend himself, speaking up also for the others because he was upset by what Jesus had just said ?

I'm afraid the latter is more likely, and that John was not yet repenting. He wanted to justify his action. Look a little further down, already in v54 we read of an incidence where he and his brother James again stand out for their lack of tolerance, Lk 9:54: "And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?". I am glad they asked first, and that Jesus rebuked them.

And in our present story, we hear John say "we tried to stop that man " *we*: I *and* the other disciples. Isn't he clearly seeking to justify himself by putting at least part of the blame on others? And then he goes on: "we only *tried* to stop him." We were not outright *mean*, we just *tried* to stop him".

What could have provoked this self-defence of John in the first place?

I think John was offended because he felt unjustly criticized. "Welcome such little children *in my name"*, Jesus had said. "Learn humility, learn to maintain the bond of fellowship with fellow believers *in my name*, i.e. in submission to *my* will, out of loyalty to me, on my behalf; in *my* strength invest your life into others - because it is me who told you so, receive them, bear with them, pray for them, *serve* them - *in in my name*!"

And here came that stranger who called on the *name* of Jesus to cast out *demons*; who *claimed* to be on God's errand while *rejecting* the fellowship of *true* disciples. I don't think we can know for sure that the man actually accomplished anything as an exorcist. Maybe he didn't. Maybe he was even part of the commotion that day when nobody succeeded in delivering a boy from his demon possession. Maybe the disciples even rebuked the man because they *blamed him* for that failure. Maybe. Maybe not. We probably don't need to know.

It is clear, though, that John and the other disciples were really upset about that fellow, and that they had passed judgement on him and felt right about it.

"Is it fair that Jesus scolds *us*", John may have asked? "Shouldn't Jesus have reprimanded the *other* fellow instead? This guy was not even a disciple! You bet *he* didn't have the sound doctrine about Christian humility all sorted out! Wasn't it *this* man who most of all disobeyed the command of Jesus to become the least of all, to humbly welcome, receive and respect other disciples as fellow believers, to honor the bond of fellowship, to shoulder some responsibility of looking after one another? Aren't we right if we confront someone like that and stop him from misleading others?

> How tolerant *should* we be ? How tolerant *can* we be without betraying our mandate ? It does not require much acquaintance with church life to know that this question will always be there. Clearly there *are* wolves in sheep's clothing, as Jesus put it elsewhere. Not everything that has a Christian appearance *is* Christian. In fact, history abounds of false claims of fake leaders. As John McArthur, a pastor in California, once jokingly said: Everyone in California can gather a following who puts on a beard and sandals if he claims that he is Moses!
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> And this is not ONLY true in California. So we cannot afford to abandon discernment and some wise judgements.

So this begs John's question: Does Jesus really expect me to still welcome with a child-like, humble attitude even those who refused and slighted my fellowship? Why should I not go and stop such a person ?

1. I think the first reason given here is that it actually doesn't work. You can't stop people who reject the fellowship of disciples – confrontation by that fellowship will never appeal to such persons. "We *tried* to stop him", says John, evidently to no avail.

2. A second reason emerges from the preceding context: As we have seen earlier, something within the disciples themselves gets in the way. In fact, we see that they could not even maintain unity and peace *within* their own little circle. Why not? Here is why: "An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest", v46.

In other words, the mark of John and the other disciples was not yet the child-like simplicity and humility commended by Jesus, but the *immaturity* of infants, a worldly ambition of being at the top for the sake of vain-glory.

3. And then Jesus shows them that they did indeed draw the line in the wrong place. Hear his reply: Do not stop him. For the one who is not against you, is for you.

Jesus is not wishy washy. He did not approve everything just to include everyone and offend no one. He never encouraged his followers to make room in the church for dissenters and unbelievers by pruning the Bible of whatever gives them offense. Not at all, for already in the following chapter he also says in Lk 10:16

> "He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me."
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> And in Lk 11:23 "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters".

In other words, the teaching of Jesus himself, handed down in the Bible, will always remain the measure for what is and is not Christian.

These words are very clear, and our passage today does not intend to contradict them. And there is no contradiction. Our passage does not ask us to *change* the measure of what is Christian. It speaks about how we should *apply* this measure, and what it takes to not make things worse.

It takes humility. The story reveals how the unregenerate heart thinks too highly of itself, and that it therefore is inclined to judge others too harshly. Our story links the habit of condemning others to an unchecked desire for **vain**-glory. And it reveals that a desire to appear superior even lingered in the hearts of the apostles and had to be addressed before they could bear fruit as church leaders.

Intolerance thrives everywhere except where there is genuine humility. Humility is the antidote to intolerance not because it is blind to flaws in others, but because it recognizes the need for grace, forgiveness and redemption – both in my own heart and in my fellow man. Being humble we do not *abandon* judgement, but we will judge ourselves first and thus recognize that we are not above any fellow man.

Application

Applying this teaching to our own lifes is a daily exercise. We know that we must be discerning, and that sometimes the responsibility is on us to courageously speak up and call a spade a spade – in our day maybe more so than ever. But Christian discernment must be married to Christian humility; humility which regards others more highly than ourselves. Condemning or looking down on others is dangerous as it may make you feel superior when in reality you yourself are not great at all.

There is no way around this paradox: To become truly great, we must become small like a child. We will become small as we set our hearts on following Jesus, who is exalted above all because he humbled himself and made himself the servant of all.

How do I apply the word of Jesus “to not stop those who are not against us”? I think what I am supposed to learn here is to pick my battles wisely. Maybe you have never had an argument with anyone who professes to believe in Jesus. I can almost say this of myself, as long as he or she has been presbyterian and reformed. Or at least presbyterian *or* reformed.

Humor aside: I can relate to John, that he was so irritated by that self-appointed exorcist. Here I find what is needed to deal with this frustration. And it gives me hope that there once was this hot-head John who had a reputation of being one of the “sons of thunder”. And see what became of him once he had walked close to Jesus: If you read his letters or his account of the gospel, you see a profoundly changed man: A man who holds God’s love for him and his neighbor closest and dearest and yet in this gentle spirit more powerfully than any other has thrust the sword of God’s truth so that it has convicted and truly converted the hearts of millions to this day.