True Greatness
Mark 9:30-41

If you wanted to work out how we typically think of greatness - what makes a person great - you could just look at history and think of Alexander the Great, Herod the Great, Peter the Great, and Catherine the Great, couldn't you? Or, you could look at leadership and think of Winston Churchill, routinely voted the Greatest Briton ever. Or the world of sport: Muhammed Ali or Michael Jordan, the Greatest of All Time. Or the world of music and show business: the Greatest Showman and the Greatest hits.

And they're great because of territories conquered, empires ruled, competitions won, or chart toppers released.

And yet, you don't have to strut the world stage like that to want a share of greatness, do you? In fact, what today's passage makes clear is that in each of us there's something looking for that kind of recognition.

The Desire for Greatness
Look at v30: 'They went on from there and passed through Galilee.' Now, imagine an old friend is visiting your area, and you'd love to meet up, but they tell you, 'sorry, it's not going to work this time, I'm just passing through' it's typically because they're en route to somewhere else, isn't it. And so is Jesus. He's begun to make his way to Jerusalem.

And he knows what's awaiting him. Verse 31, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." But then Mark adds, v32, the disciples 'did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.'

Why? I mean, in the past, they've had no problem expressing their opinion, or asking Jesus to explain things. Why are they suddenly reticent, even afraid to do so?

Well, have you ever heard the expression, 'it's easier to ask forgiveness than permission'? You don't want to ask the question, because you don't want to hear the answer. At least, not one that doesn't fit with the way you want things to be. And the disciples have already mapped out the way they want things to be, and Jesus talking about dying doesn't fit that, so best avoid the subject.

However, there was a subject they *were* happy to talk about, again just not in front of Jesus. Look at v33-34, 'When he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.'

Now, in a court of law, at least in the old days, if an accused person refused to answer a question that couldn't be taken as a sign of guilt. But here, their refusal to answer does display a guilty conscience, doesn't it? They know that when it comes to self-promotion, Jesus would not approve.

But note what Mark says. They were arguing '*with one another* about who was the greatest'. So they're comparing: who's where in the pecking order? And especially, who's at the top?

Now, you and I are way too polite to argue with each other like that. But what about comparing yourself to others? How your colleague's presentation or results were better or worse than yours,

and how that makes you feel. Or, how that person looks or behaves, in comparison to you - and what that does to you?

Or think about when someone compliments you, or when you wish they did. When you respect them, because they're 'up there' in comparison to you, their compliments feel good. But when you think they're beneath you, what they say doesn't matter nearly as much, does it?

You see, we're all using some metric or other to compare ourselves to others, to feel good about ourselves: that we're higher up the ladder, whatever that ladder is, than they are. That we're more gifted, or successful, more moral or insightful, or even more humble than they are. In other words, we're arguing, internally, for our own greatness.

Why? Because we need to know we count. That we're someone. You see, for as long as man has looked up into the night sky we've felt small. As David says, 'When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him?' (Psalm 8). In comparison to the vast scale of the universe, we need to know we matter.

The question is, where do you get that from?

The Toxicity of Greatness

Think what happened right before this episode and where these disciples were likely getting their significance from.

Jesus had just taken 3 of them up the Mount of Transfiguration with him, leaving 9 behind. What if you were one of the 3? Or one of the 9? There's nothing like you being chosen over others, or others being chosen over you to stimulate your ego, or your jealousy, is there? But both are a desire for status, of being on the inside - provided others are on the outside. CS Lewis called it the Desire for the Inner Ring, a desire, he said, that 'has the power to make a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things.' Beginning with arguing, if only with yourself, over who's greatest. Answer: those of us on the inside. Those of us with status.

Last week the UK press published photos of Prince William selling copies of the Big Issue. It's a magazine sold by homeless people to earn money. And when members of the public realised it was William, they took selfies with him. Which is great, I would probably have done the same, but would I if it was a homeless person selling the same magazine? William has status, a homeless person doesn't. And we like to rub shoulders with greatness, because it makes us feel good about ourselves, but we'll also show honour to those with status, in a way we wouldn't to those without it, when we think they can help us up the ladder and increase our own status.

Which means that if you think it's your status that means you matter, it's going to be toxic for the way you treat others.

Ok, but it wasn't just that 9 had been left down in the valley, it's that those 9 had also failed to cast out a demon. There's nothing like failure on your part, or someone else's, to get comparison going, is there?

Do any of you do Wordle? It feels good to get it in 3 or less, doesn't it. But how much better it feels when I beat Su. This week I was talking to a sports chaplain who reminded me how the world of sport is brutal on your sense of self-worth, because it's so tied to performance.

But it's not just sportsmen, is it? Get your sense of importance from your research output, or how you're doing as a parent, or how you're doing at casting out demons, spiritually, and you'll feel great when you're performing well, especially if others aren't, but lousy when they are and you're not.

Think your performance is what means you matter and you're always going to be emotionally unstable.

But there's also what comes after this episode. Verse 38, 'John said to [Jesus], "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." Do you see the irony? The disciples are trying to stop a man doing successfully what they have just failed to do. What is that? It's possessiveness. You see, get your significance, your sense that you matter, from what you do or the position you hold, and you're going to need to maintain the monopoly. You can't allow anyone else to trespass on that area, or grow in that area.

But notice what John *doesn't* say about him. He doesn't say, we tried to stop him 'because he was not following *you*.' They try to stop him because 'he was not following *us*.' And that doesn't just displays a wrong sense of self-importance. It's a display of a them-and-us mentality. He's not one of *us*. We're better, morally better, than him. And just like them, we can feel better about ourselves, like we're up there on the greatness ladder, by looking down on others who are not one of us, morally, politically. They're woke, or not woke enough. They're progressive, or not progressive enough. They're conservative, or not conservative enough.

And in the Greco-Roman culture of Jesus' day it was totally socially acceptable to promote yourself, and your honour and greatness. In fact, the great and the good would spend money on doing exactly that, by erecting monuments or sponsoring civic works with their names on them.

And in our own day, social media gives us the platform to do exactly the same. And instead of building monuments, we post beautiful pictures of ourselves, or our holidays, or we post our political views to show whose side we're on. And the danger is, we're saying, 'look at me'. Notice me. Look how great, or right, or both, I am.

But Jesus turns the way we think of greatness on its head.

The Nature of True Greatness

Now, they won't tell Jesus what they're talking about, but he knows, doesn't he? Look at v35, 'He sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."'

Now, if you were to ask anyone in the ancient world to construct a ladder of greatness, on no one's ladder would a servant appear at the top. Heads of families, the rich, patrons, people *with* servants , sure, but servants? They would have been at the bottom. In fact, the whole point of servants was to serve the man at the top and work for his honour.

Jesus totally inverts that. And the truly great person is the person who serves. True greatness gives honour, to others, rather than seeking it for itself. Proverbs 18:12 says, 'humility comes before honour'. Augustine said that before a tree can grow tall it has to plunge its roots down. In other words, before there can ever be any upward growth in true honour there has to first be a downward growth in humility. And as someone else has said, humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less. It's taking your desire to be seen, to be recognised, to be noticed, out of the picture.

But look what Jesus does next, v36, 'He took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."'

Now, when I was a child my Father would say, 'children should be seen and not heard.' Which is harsh, but in Jesus' day it was worse, because children weren't even seen, let alone heard. And if servants were down the ladder, children were down there with them. Unnoticed and overlooked.

And so Jesus is saying, true greatness doesn't just serve, it serves the least. It serves the ones no-one else notices. It serves those at the bottom of the pecking order. The little people. Who is that? Well, firstly, it's children. We live in a culture where the birth rate is collapsing, because children are a burden on the great life I want to live. So we don't value children, and as a culture we don't value those who look after them, like stay at home mums. They're told they need to get a proper job. But those who follow Jesus will see things differently. We'll value children and those who care for them. Secondly, it's the poor and the refugee - those who have no power to help you up the ladder. Thirdly, it's the unseen - the unborn, the elderly, the mentally and physically disabled. Do we abort them, or euthanise them? No. True greatness serves them and just as Jesus takes this child in his arms, it welcomes them. Because true greatness isn't obsessed with self, only seeing itself, it sees those no one else sees.

And yet, Jesus goes further, doesn't he? He says, 'whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.' Now, he's not saying we should all go in to child care, though if you'd like to volunteer for crèche let me know. What he is saying is that he does not come among us as a VIP, driving a great car, wearing great clothes, earning a great salary. He comes as the least. The one we'd be tempted to brush off. And when we welcome them, we welcome him. And when we welcome him, we welcome God.

But here's the thing: How can you do any of this? How can you do it without it being about you? About you being noticed? About you being seen to serve?

Only if you know the greatest person in the universe already sees you.

The Transforming Power of The Greatest

And this passage begins with Jesus telling them, v31, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him." Now if them trying to stop a man successfully doing what they had failed to do is ironic, think how ironic that statement is. Because Jesus takes the title 'the Son of Man' from Daniel 7, where Daniel saw a vision of 'one like a son of man' coming on the clouds of heaven to God, the Ancient of Days, and Daniel says, 'And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages should serve him.' (Dan 7:14). In other words, the Son of Man is the greatest of the great, and every man is in his hands.

And yet here is Jesus saying, I'm that Son of Man, and I will be given into their hands. The One with power over every power will be given over to their power. Listen to how Paul describes it: 'Though he [Jesus] was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross' (Phil 2:6-8). And the highest became the lowest. The richest became the poorest. The greatest became the least of all - and died the death of the outsider.

Why? Because he took our place. Because at the cross he took upon himself all our pride and all our jealousy; all our wanting to be seen and be served; our desire to be the greatest, and our failure to love the least. And he did it so that God our Heavenly Father might welcome you into his arms like Jesus welcomes this child into his.

And when you see him serving you like that, and you know he saw you when you were nothing and a no-one, and that because of him God your heavenly Father accepts you, and honours you, and has picked up from the lowest place and lifted you to the highest, you'll want to serve and it won't matter whether anyone else sees you or not, because you know he sees you. And his opinion of you doesn't go up and down based on your performance, or status, or whose group you're in. It's based on his love for you and that you're in him.

You see it's only his true greatness, the One who served you, that can give you a significance and a worth that lifts you up without puffing you up. Status, performance, moral record, being in the in-group, will leave you fragile and vulnerable, and proud. The gospel leaves you humble and wanting to serve, not because you want to be seen but out of love for the one who served you.

But it'll also do something else. It'll change the way you see others, and especially those who are having more success than you, or who aren't in your camp. Listen to how Jesus responds to John over the man casting out demons: v39-40, 'Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work *in my name* will be able soon afterward to speak evil *of me*. For the one who is not against us is for us."'

So the critical issue is, whose name is this being done in? Whose name is being promoted? And in our desire for greatness we want that to be our name, or group, or clique. But when what Christ has done sinks in, you want it to be his name and competitiveness disappears.

Before Paul says what he says about Christ humbling himself he talks about others who are also preaching the gospel. And some, he says, are doing it from good motives, others from not so good motives. But then he says, 'What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.' (Phil 1:18)

You see, when you know life is not about you looking great, but about Christ being great, you'll welcome and serve the least, you'll be open hearted to others, and you'll rejoice whenever you see him being promoted. And as you do, you'll feel great. Not because you're great, but because Christ is great.