

James 3.13-4.3,7-8a

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Mark 9.30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

I wonder what it is that you want? Really really want more than anything else?

For a couple of years when I was little, there were only two things on my wishlist. But I must admit they were quite big things! I wanted wings, and a pony. Now I think I knew, deep down, that I wasn't going to get them, especially the wings, as flying humans haven't been invented yet, but I still really wanted them.

And both our readings this morning are essentially about what people want - what do we crave, what do we value the most and wish that we had?

I think one of the things that is most clear about people, all throughout history and right up to today, is that people want to be important. And this has been the cause of many awful things, wars, arguments, the destruction of cities and the fall of empires. To be sure, not everybody daydreams about being a king or queen, but we would all like to be respected, to have our ideas listened to, to have at least that level of authority.

And in our reading from Mark's gospel the disciples are squabbling about which one of them is the best. I wonder what things they thought gave them the most brownie points. Were they saying - I make the most money; I am the oldest; I've learned the most? Or maybe they were saying 'Jesus called me before you'; 'Well I always understand his parables quicker than you!'... You can imagine it quite vividly, and it's almost funny,

them walking along bickering under their breath so Jesus wouldn't hear, getting all offended with each other. I imagine by the time they stopped for the night they were all pretty grumpy!

But the poor disciples, they didn't get it. I think deep down they knew they were concentrating on the wrong thing, and that's why they didn't want Jesus to hear them argue. And I like that Jesus doesn't tell them off. He doesn't emphasise how silly they are, he simply says 'Whoever wants to be first must be last, and servant of all'. Just like that. All the things they might have thought gave them the edge, made them a slightly better disciple than the others, gone. Because I bet none of them had said 'I am definitely not the greatest, you are all much wiser and more important than I am'. It's in our nature to not like being least. Nobody wants to be thought of as insignificant. I know that I, and probably you as well, would be a bit upset if I worked hard on something or offered my time to help someone, and nobody thanked or acknowledged me. We crave recognition and respect from others. We all kind of want to be the greatest.

So what Jesus is teaching is actually pretty hard. And the disciples probably didn't understand it. So Jesus illustrates what he means by being humble, with the help of a child. He is saying that to welcome the child is to show wisdom. A child has no powerful connections, they won't introduce you to the rich and famous, they have no job skills or experience or money. A child does not benefit you in the push to be recognised as being even a little bit great. But to welcome the child is to recognise that they too, are a person, who shares equally in the humanity you experience. It certainly goes against a culture which gives honour and status to people who know all the other people with honour and status. But the child, despite offering you nothing in return, is on the same level of greatness in the eyes of God as the most argumentative disciple, or the highest emperor of Rome.

Greatness is not to be sought after, because in a way, we already have it. We have the greatness of God's care for us, and there should be nothing we wish for more than this. So in this competitive world, where we are constantly comparing ourselves to other people, always trying to better ourselves, always wishing for things we don't have, it's worth taking a moment to step back and just reflect on the fact that God's idea of greatness is entirely different to our own. To be great as Jesus taught is to be full of wisdom. The kind of wisdom the writer James was talking about in our first reading, which is pure, peaceful, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy, and without partiality. This is a wisdom which knows deep down that every person in every country at every social level at every age is equally precious and great in the eyes of God. And if we really have that kind of wisdom, we will naturally forget about trying to get ahead. We won't need to squabble like the disciples about who will get the most

brownie points. And what we really want, deep down, might start to change. Greatness in the world is not really worth anything, but instead we might find ourselves helping to house the homeless person, offering hospitality to the person who won't invite us back in return, and welcoming the children.

It doesn't matter how old you are, how educated, how rich, how ordinary, how quiet, how confident, how much you know about religion... The newborn baby who possesses only the breath in their body is just as great to God as the most famous emperor, and you are too.

So what is it you seek? What is it you really, really want?

Jesus said "Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me."