

Sunday 20th October 2024; Trinity21. Benefice Holy Communion Ampleforth.

Last week I talked about the difference between doing and being. This week we are looking at not only being but what we mean by greatness.

I must admit my usual response when people ask me how I am, I say, 'Great thanks'. Great? Really? Am I great? Don't think so!

That does appear to be the wish of James and John in today's Gospel though. They ask to sit on either side of Jesus in his glory. They appear to want to be top dogs, the big cheeses, in the court of Heaven.

Understandably, the other disciples are angry about this. They are probably saying to James and John, "Who do you think you are?" because it appears to them, James and John are full of themselves, their egos are inflated, and they are living with an exaggerated sense of their own importance, and they don't seem to mind pushing their brother disciples aside in the process.

But don't you and I want to be great too, in life, work, and the things we do; in friendships, marriage, and parenting; in our community and among our peers; in our faith and prayer? Don't we want to be great in the eyes of God, in the eyes of others, to enjoy the light of our perceived greatness, receiving attention, recognition, approval, applause? Maybe our greatness is actually power or control over others who we consider inferior or even stupid, who need our advice and guidance because in our opinion they don't get things right. Maybe our sense of greatness is more to do with fear, insecurity, and self-doubt, so we belittle, humiliate, de-value and bully others.

But maybe there is another interpretation of the behaviour of James and John. It follows on from what I was talking

about last week about being someone. Yes, they clearly were getting too big for their boots in one sense but in another perhaps it was an indication of their wish to be someone greater, not for their own aims but for those of Jesus which required them to need bigger boots. What if they had outgrown the boots of their current lives and identities and they were trying to connect to a larger, and more complete life and identity? Maybe they are right in what they seek but mistaken in how they are seeking it, because they need to realize that glory and greatness are not about all the many ways they could “lord it over” others by shows of power, rank, and position, and not something that is earned or accomplished by devaluing others, but something into which we are transformed. Maybe greatness is not something we have but something we become, a gift from God.

Perhaps James and John don't appreciate this, but their request perhaps was something evoked from deeper within them by the Holy Spirit. Jesus's reaction almost suggests this because He doesn't say no to them, he doesn't dismiss or judge them. Instead, he says, “You do not know what you are asking.” He doesn't deny that greatness and glory can be theirs, he is making sure they understand where this path will take them and what it will ask of them? Instead, he tells them what greatness and glory look like, and they don't look like what we think they do. They don't look like what is recognized, rewarded or the things most of us strive for. What they do look like is a cup and a baptism. The cup is the cup of self-surrender, the cup of Gethsemane, the cup of self-sacrifice and humility. It's a choice between power and the meaning and life. It's setting aside a smaller and known quantity of life for a larger and unknown quantity. It's putting the well-being of another on a level with our own. It's letting go of an exaggerated sense of our own importance, of giving up the need to prove oneself because you finally realize that you don't have anything to

prove because all things of true value come for the glory and greatness of God, not you or me.

The baptism means allowing ourselves to be immersed in a life that is larger and beyond ourselves. It's living in a world in which the first shall be last, the last shall be first, and the great ones are those who serve and care for others. It means being connected to a fullness of life that is more than we can generate for ourselves. It happens when we love our neighbour as ourselves, turn the other cheek, are peacemakers, hungering and thirsting for justice, offering forgiveness, and enabling reconciliation. It's letting the waters of compassion flow as we reach out and care for "the least of these", welcoming the stranger, and respecting the dignity of every human being.

Are you able to drink the cup of surrender and drown in the waters of baptism? That's Jesus' question to James and John and each one of us today. "We are able," James and John answer. Yes, they are, and so are we. We are all able. But are we willing? What is the cup in your life today? And how much are you willing to drink? What is the baptism awaiting you today and how deep into those waters are you willing to dive?

Thanks be to God. Amen.