

SERMON: Sunday – 19 September 2021 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Last of all and servant of all

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Mark 9:30-37

Who is the greatest? Can you believe that was the question the disciples were arguing about on the way to Capernaum with Jesus. They didn't understand what Jesus was teaching them about what would happen to the Son of Man, their Messiah. They didn't understand Jesus' words and they were too frightened to ask him about it.

I suspect they were frightened because they didn't want to hear what they suspected he'd say. What they wanted to hear was about greatness and victory of their enemies and being rewarded with top spot and first place among the peoples of Galilee and beyond.

At least when asked what it was they had been arguing about on the road they kept quiet, probably rightly ashamed at their behaviour.

It's then that Jesus gives them one of their most important lessons about what it means to be great. Greatness in God's kingdom is child-like.

Children are like the greatest.

Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me' (Mark 9:38).

In what ways are children like the greatest? According to one commentary I read:

- Children show us that our imaginations are pathways to God
- Children teach us to risk hard questions on our way to God
- Children teach us to trust God's abundance
- Children teach us what divine power looks like

Children show us that our imaginations are pathways to God

- Adults can lose the capacity for wonder, newness and strangeness.

Children teach us to risk hard questions on our way to God

- An unwillingness to ask tough questions of themselves, of each other and of Jesus can limit growth and fellowship with God

Children teach us to trust God's abundance

- they assume plenitude, there is enough greatness for all not just for me.

Children teach us what divine power looks like

- helpless vulnerability.

I don't know if James was thinking of this encounter with Jesus when he wrote his letter and gave us that stark comparison between the way of the world and the way of Jesus; between worldly wisdom and the wisdom from above; between choosing to be dismissive of God or submissive.

We might list the comparison in a table like this:

Submit yourselves, then, to God (James 3:7)	
WHEN WE SAY NO	WHEN WE SAY YES
Envy	Deeds done in humility
Selfish Ambition	Pure Wisdom
Earthly	Peace-loving
Unspiritual	Considerate
Demonic	Submissive
Disorder	Full of mercy and good fruit
Every evil practice	Impartial
Covetting	Sincere
Quarrelling and fighting	Takes last place
Killing	Serves all
	Welcomes children

Perhaps the most supreme example of being submissive to God was in Jesus life when he prayed in agony 'Father, not my will but yours be done' (Luke 22:42).

So what does it look like for us to submit to God and be great in God's kingdom?

And that's worth stressing, that yes you and I are made by God to be great in God's kingdom.

Our original DNA is to be made in God's image. We are rooted in original goodness and Jesus' life was all about showing us what that truth looks like when enabled by the Holy Spirit.

So let's embrace the Christ life of last place and service of all. Let's submit and draw near to God today and everyday.

Let us pray

We thank you God our heavenly Father that you teach us what true greatness looks like. Help us to be like little children trusting in your fullness and using our imaginations to connect with you in deep and meaningful ways through your Spirit. Help us to take our lead from Jesus life and death and resurrection. Until your kingdom comes in all glory. Amen.