

SERMON FOR ORDINARY SUNDAY 25B  
ALL SAINTS BIRKENHEAD 2018

I grew up playing a lot of sport. My first love was rugby which I played well into my 20's. The other was cricket, also another sport I played into my 20's. There was always an amazing feeling when you woke up on a Saturday morning, a combination of nerves and excitement. I do miss those days. But one of thing things I don't miss is losing, to my shame, I was always an incredibly competitive person, as the saying goes, losing was not an option! But as I grew older and matured, I realized how foolish that attitude was. It was firstly the enjoyment of the game that kept me playing not the winning.

And though we may claim that perspective – it is about the enjoyment of the game – the reality for professional sports is that in the end it is only really about who wins. Gone are the days of the simple enjoyment of playing the game. I

sometimes wonder if it is about “sport” any more. It seems sometimes to be more about money, about status, about power, about who's on top. The fights one sometimes sees lead me to wonder if the need to win at all costs overtakes the players and any thought they might loose is too much to handle.

2

Jesus said “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all”.

I don't mean to pour scorn on the achievements of those who train hard and compete in sport. I know how hard it is! I simply want to draw out the difference between where the world sees greatness and where Jesus sees greatness for his followers. Be it sport or any other human endeavour, competition is often the spur to success. However it does appear that

competition is not the goal. The success of beating others is the end result. Somehow the followers of Jesus are required to see things differently.

Competition and a desire to win may be appropriate in the sports arena, but they are not appropriate for creating good relationships and living in harmony. Jesus is talking about how to live in the community of those who seek to follow him.

3

Jesus disciples seem to have great difficulty in understanding what he says. The disciples say inappropriate things. They keep children away from Jesus. They are anxious when they should be sleeping, and sleeping when they should be anxious. Continually they misunderstand what Jesus is teaching and doing. And Jesus keeps reclaiming these wayward disciples and giving them a new task.

How are we expected to form a community of believers if the disciples have such a difficult time doing it? How can we be part of life in the reign of God when, like the disciples, we don't do as Jesus asks? But look at the way Jesus treats the disciples. He keeps on teaching them even when they fail to understand. His patience and perseverance is the key to forming good relationships with his followers.

4

He allows for failure to happen, but doesn't let people stay with their failures before helping them back to their task again.

There's a demonstration of Jesus care for the disciples in today's gospel. Jesus asks the disciples "What were you arguing about on the way?" They don't answer him probably because they know it's something they shouldn't be

doing. Jesus doesn't reprimand them but uses the situation to teach them about true greatness.

“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 the one who sent me’.”

5

The disciples are not reprimanded for what seems like a ridiculous argument. Jesus simply redefines the notion of greatness. Success and failure, winning and losing, achievement and non-achievement are different in the reign of God. Disciples are expected to have different standards to live by. Being the servant is a new way of acting. Not necessarily a pleasant way either. Cross bearing and losing ones life are very specific ways of being the servant.

Then Jesus sets a child in their midst. What does a child have to say about being a servant? In Jesus' day the child had no rights. The child is under the authority of another. This is the lowly status of the child and of the servant. No rights and under authority. Welcoming those who are in this position is to welcome Jesus, and to welcome Jesus is to welcome God.

6

This is so opposed to our way of thinking that it's difficult to grasp what it means. We don't have servants, and children in our society certainly have rights, even though they are all too frequently abused.

One of the unfortunate things about New Zealand society is that our record of child abuse is appalling. It shows us that many still treat children as they were treated in Jesus day. In

other words children are still treated as pawns to be used. In spite of the rights for children enshrined in law, they are still the most vulnerable in our society. The other vulnerable group is of course the elderly who also suffer from abuse. The gospel keeps telling us that the most vulnerable in our society are the ones God loves most. They are the example of how we are all to act.

7

How does our society measure up to the request of Jesus that we be like the most vulnerable? How are we, the followers of Jesus called Church trying to do as Jesus did? At least our synod passed some motions recently which at the very least shows we have a concern about such issues. But the practical action needs to follow our words.

One cannot help but think of the other vulnerable people at present seen in the refugees. Yes I know we are all overwhelmed by the enormity of what we see and the seeming impossibility of doing anything of worth.

It seems to me it is not only a matter of how many refugees we take in. The bigger question is what do we do with them when they are here? How can we help their home countries find stability and peace? How can we meet them not as the 'the other' but as equals, as human beings, loved by God.

8

For in the end it's all about power really, isn't it? Who is the greatest is really about who has the most power. This community here, just like the community of the disciples, will also have people who want the power. There will be those on the road who argue about who is the greatest. We need someone to bring that into the open and ask the question like Jesus did, "What were you arguing about on the road?" We also need to recognise we are all in the same situation of wanting to be powerful. The firm gentleness of Jesus teaching is also a way to correct power.

Rivalry, competition, and the race for the top are some ways of showing greatness. Jesus is asking us to consider building a community of people where there are very different ways of showing greatness. Jesus asks us to open our arms to the powerless. What if the notion of greatness could be conceived of in Jesus terms? Perhaps just for a while we would stop arguing on the road. Perhaps, just for a while, we would glimpse for ourselves the joy of holding the powerless in our midst. But we need to be prepared to become the powerless as well. For we, too, can enter into that special relationship Jesus has with the child. What a fellowship of hospitality is established when we are in the presence of Jesus like the child in his arms. Here at this table we come for that hospitality and long to be fed.