

Today's gospel lesson is all about leadership and who's important and who's not in our world and in the church.

³⁵*He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."* ³⁶*Then he took a little child and put it among them" Mark 9*

These stories and the ones that precede them in the gospel narrative – as we have studied them in the last few weeks - are set on the road to Capernaum, and it is on that road to Capernaum that so much seems to happen in terms of understanding Jesus.

Capernaum was – if you like – Jesus headquarters for his ministry, before he turned his face towards Jerusalem. It was a small fishing village by the Sea of Galilee – and it was where Peter and Andrew and James and John had worked on the boats until one day a wandering teacher had said to them "Follow me!" It was the place that Jesus always came back to from the journeys he made far and wide. It was the place that became the focus of the stories about teaching and healing that was spreading like wildfire – from mouth to mouth – through the country.

And it was so ordinary. It was just like – in many regards – the place where you and I work and live. It was a town where ordinary people got along with their lives – and their priorities were pretty much like ours – how to make ends meet, how to bring the children up well, how to understand what it is all about. It was full of fishermen – but it could just as easily be a place of teachers and social workers, and lawyers and accountants..... people like you and me.

The point is that it was at the heart of this extraordinarily ORDINARY place that Jesus looked when he wanted to form the team who would carry his work forward. And the people he called personally we know were pretty well like us too in other ways. They had their failures. They had their imperfections.

When we read the scripture this morning we are almost taken aback by the degree to which these disciples could be self-obsessed and selfish. I mean this is a critical moment. Remember last week how Peter said – "You are the Messiah", and Jesus told the disciples that he will be put to death. And in the midst of this anxiety and confusion what are the disciples doing – arguing about who is the greatest!

It would be funny if it were not so tragic. And often, of course, the church as we know it behaves in exactly the same way. Becoming obsessed with where the authority lies, who's in charge, while the world collapses around it under the very burdens of living that Jesus addressed.

Here is a story that is as old as the hills – it's almost a legend. But it tells how Jesus, after the Ascension, was welcomed into the gates of heaven by a host of heavenly angels. "Welcome home", Lord, they cried. "What happens next?" "It's all right", Jesus said, "I have left some disciples down there who are going to carry my mission forward." The angels were not impressed. "That lot down there? They are no-hopers. They are cowards. They are ignorant. They lie! They're boastful. You can't be serious. So when they fail, what is plan B?"

And Jesus said: "There is no plan B!" "I only have them!"

And it is a very big issue. “How can such imperfect, hopeless people be trusted with the task of building God’s kingdom?”

I suppose there are two things to be said here. Firstly, it carries an enormous message of encouragement for us – because we know we are far from perfect, and we know that we are often hopeless. We are reminded that Christ does not look to the *unco guid* to form the society of his friends. He didn’t do it on earth when he ate and drank with call girls and tax collectors. He doesn’t do it now.

So I’m reminded of our very own Robert Burns here.

*O ye, wha are sae guid yoursel,
Sae pious and sae holy,
Ye’ve nought to do but mark and tell
Your neebours’ fauts and folly ;
Whase life is like a weel-gaun mill,
Supplied wi’ store o’ water ; The heapet happer’s ebbing still,
An’ still the clap plays clatter !*

*Then gently scan your brother man,
Still gentler sister woman ;
Tho’ they may gang a kennin wrang,
To step aside is human :
One point must still be greatly dark,
The moving why they do it ;
And just as lamely can ye mark
How far perhaps they rue it.*

*Who made the heart, ’tis He alone
Decidedly can try us :
He knows each chord, its various tone,
Each spring, its various bias :
Then at the balance let’s be mute,
We never can adjust it ;
What’s done we partly may compute,
But know not what’s resisted.¹*

As Burns suggests – in the whole pattern of human life – and in his own context he would argue that as much for those in the church that in the streets of Dumfries – God knows us and our potential, and it is not up to us to judge or to put down.

The second thing to say is that Jesus in this story sets down an amazing model for leadership. Just think about what happens. The disciples are back-biting and arguing. Who is going to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. As we said, it is not a pretty sight – but it is exactly what is going on. On that road – they are playing power politics, and eventually when Jesus quizzes them they are too embarrassed to say so.

¹ Robert Burns (1759-1796) “ Address to the Unco Guid”

And then.... And then.... Jesus calls a young child to come to him. Remember elsewhere in Mark, Jesus says that you have to be like a child to enter into the kingdom at all.²

Then he took a little child and put it among them

Jesus welcomes the child to the centre of the community and wraps his arm around her--the voiceless one--and suggests that if we want to be great, then we must practice welcoming the voiceless to the very centre of the community. Expand the community's center to include those people at the margins.

This is what greatness looks like in Jesus' ministry. It is an insignificant greatness. It is counter-intuitive to all those who know well the ways of the world.

In fact it is scandalous. Jesus is setting himself at odds with society – maybe even with us. You see, in his community children were right down there with women, the sick and foreigners. A male Jew was at the top of the ladder – a Gentile woman was a “dog”.

And Jesus takes all this and turns it on its head – topsy-turvy. Jesus might have chosen priests or Pharisees to be his followers – he chose fishermen and tax collectors. Jesus might have pointed towards a king as the model of leadership, he took a child and set her on his knee. This is greatness – kingdom greatness. And we find it hard to fit in with it.

Do you get it? It is a Masterly plan. It is to put weakness, foolishness, childlikeness at the centre of God's plan. And the message is: If God can love even these, if God can love even us, then God's love is truly for everyone. And then we are in touch with the power that can change lives and change our world.

² Mark 10:15