MARK 9:30-37
A HUMBLE SERVANT?

Do you have an ambition? Is there something that you want to be or do? Is your ambition to be the best that you can be at something? It might be a work ambition, or something you do as a hobby and you want to be better at it, you want to be as good as you can be. We are encouraged to have ambitions, because ambitions lead us to aspire and aspiration is good for the soul, it leads us to think higher! Is your ambition to be a better Christian, more faithful to Jesus, and to cut out the weak spots? When does ambition become selfish? What line do we cross that turns our ambition into something toxic, that damages relationships with other people? At what point does that ambition become envy and become an excuse to trample all over other people in order to make our ambition come true? Is it when it becomes a competition? Is it when our ambition to be the best that we can be leads us to compete with other people and try to be better than they are? Or is it when our ambition comes into conflict with someone else's ambition and then we think we have to fight for our corner and win and beat this other person?

Conflict raises all sorts of reactions: some people just love a good argument and maybe don't take it any further than a verbal ding-dong that gets the blood going, and it doesn't become personal and it produces no lasting resentment. Other people run a mile from conflict; they do anything to avoid an argument, they give in to the other person rather than propose an alternative view because that is the kind of person they are; conflict frightens them! Conflict happens in church as in any other social grouping; some people think that it shouldn't happen in Church because Christians should get along with each other better than that and they have a point, but conflict does happen, again because different people have different desires and different points of view. Maybe we don't handle that as well as we should! There are times when conflict is necessary in a sort of a way: when we make decisions, and there is more than one option and more than one opinion, we either have to talk through these differences or ignore them and ignoring them doesn't mean they will go away.

Jesus' disciples were arguing amongst themselves. They were arguing about who was the greatest amongst them; who is the number one disciple. Someone has suggested the kind of arguments that some of them might have made in support of their case: Peter, James and John might have argued that one of them was the greatest because they had been with Jesus on the mountain when He was dazzling white with glory; or that they had been in the room at Jairus' house to witness the miracle when Jesus healed Jairus' daughter. Peter had been the spokesman at Caesarea Philippi; "You are the Christ", he said so maybe he was the greatest. Andrew might have argued that he brought the boy with the loaves and fishes when Jesus fed the five thousand, and he brought Peter to Jesus. Judas Iscariot might have argued that he was the trusted treasurer and the administrator of the group, so he should be the greatest. The others might have been aggrieved because they had not been singled out for any special privileges, arguing that they should have had more! None of this is recorded, but we can imagine what was being said and how people were feeling and how tempers were running high.

Mark tells us that this argument took place against the background of Jesus' teaching about the cross. He has been telling His disciples for the second time that he would suffer, die and be raised, that he had come to serve; and then they argue about greatness. *"what we're…" (Mark 9:33)* He sits down, the teacher at work; he gathers them round. *"If anyone…" (Mark 9:35)* These are Jesus' kingdom values and they are different. Greatness in the world's eyes is all about power, importance, celebrity, fame, wealth – these are the things that make people great in our world. In Jesus' eyes, greatness is found in a very different place; for Him the path to become the Saviour of the world and the Lord of glory was the path that led to the cross, suffering and death, to service, and not a way anyone ever chose to go or wanted to take. For Jesus, the way to greatness for His disciples was the way of service. To be the very last? How

does that sound? We are not to use being last as a deliberate strategy "because that will get me to be first!" To be last – who is the greatest person in church – the one who washes the toilets? The one who serves and clears away tables? The one who weeds the garden? The one who does the jobs nobody else wants to do; the one who does the jobs you turn your nose up at? Do you know the old joke? What is the slowest thing on four legs? Two Christians trying to go through a door! Because they are both wanting to serve and let the other go first! Ok, it is not the funniest joke ever, but you get the point! It is not always that way in church! Christians are not always so good at being servants.

The second thing Jesus does is to take little child into the group discussion: *"He took…" (Mark 9:36f)* How do we understand this? Some people will lead you to compare what Jesus said in Matthew's version of this story where Jesus tells the disciples *"Unless you…" (Mt 18:3)* Then they will begin to try to find out what quality it is in children that Jesus wants us to have. Is it children's innocence, or their sense of dependence on others, or some other ideal quality that children have that adults have lost? Is Jesus holding up the little child as an ideal of human behaviour for adults to copy? You and I both know that children are the same as human beings as adults are; children share the same qualities and the same faults as adults; they are not any more ideal human beings than we are. Children can be humble, they can have a sense of dependence, but can also be hurtful, proud, and bullies. So that is not what Jesus means!

To understand what Jesus means when He says *"Whoever…" (Mark 9:37)* we need to understand first century culture. Children were nothing in Jesus' world, they were no more than goods and chattels; they had no rights, no status; they were completely insignificant and so often ignored. When Jesus says "become like children" or "welcome little children" this is not about children and the way they behave; this is about the disciples' attitude *to* children. Children are the least and the lowest, the most insignificant, the last in society – "welcome them as if you are welcoming the Lord of glory! Children are the least and lowest in society – become like them and see yourself as the least and lowest, the servant of others!" We have to learn to accept the idea of being insignificant and that being insignificant in the world's eyes, as we serve others, is the path to greatness in Jesus' eyes. "True greatness is to be found in being little, true importance in being unimpressive." (France)

This turns the world upside down for us. Everything in the world screams at us that power, wealth, and importance matters. We scramble to become important if we follow that pattern, or adopt that attitude. That's when ambition to be best that we can be for ourselves, turns sour because then life becomes a competition that we have to win. Children turn lunch into a race and they have to win! Children find it hard to win without boasting and crowing about it to the losers or who find it hard to lose without blaming someone else for losing. Adults do just same, except the stakes are higher and we can be more subtle. Office life can be collegial, but it can also be one of the most competitive places on the planet as one tries to get above the other in the pecking order. Even Christian ministers can display some measure of being competitive – "my Church is bigger than yours and we have…", though of course this is expressed in much more subtle ways!

Does this change the way we think? A friend of mine was telling us the other day that he had been telling his congregation off for complaining about the way in which children were behaving in church, complaining about the noise they made and generally giving the impression these children were unwelcome. Contrast that with an Order of Service I came across a couple of years ago: "We are happy to have children among our congregation during worship and are happy for them to act like children!" Be happy to serve: some of you have told me that you don't think I should be serving at our lunches, that I should not be washing dishes, clearing tables and the like; Jesus washed His disciples' feet as a servant, so I think it fits for me to serve tables! Does this change the way we think?

Do you want to find out how Christian faith meets the real world? Read James! It is full of the most practical wisdom about all kinds of issues and questions. In the piece we read today, James tells us exactly why there are arguments in life; he tells us where envy and selfish ambition come from; he tells us what we need to be to be better people. *"What causes…" (4:1f)* Is it your way or the highway? Is it what you want or you're leaving? I have to say that this kind of attitude doesn't surface very often here but let's not become complacent about any of this. On the other hand, *"Wisdom that…" (3:17)* There are seven qualities there that when we put them into practice, make for very good human relations even if they don't speed us up going through the door!

People to pick soft fruit; people to staff care homes; people to work in hotels and restaurants – in our culture these are jobs nobody wants to do, so they are done by people from other places. Why does no-one want to do them? Jesus came to serve, to put others before Himself, to suffer and die on the cross for the sake of others, and to be our Saviour; then He was raised. The Lord of glory was first a humble servant; we love Him for it! But He challenges us to think in the same way, to serve, to welcome insignificant people, to care for others. Or will we argue about who should be greatest in our church? *"whoever…" (Mark 9:37)*