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**True Greatness (Mark 9. 30-37)**  
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I invite you to join with me in reflecting on the gospel reading for this Sunday. It falls into two parts: Jesus' prediction of his death and resurrection and the teaching on true greatness.

Jesus foretells his death and resurrection on several occasions in the gospels, both directly as he does here, and indirectly through images and allusions. In Mark's gospel there are three occasions (Mk 8:31-38; Mark 9: 30-32; Mark 10:32-34) when he speaks directly about it. It is interesting to reflect in each case on the context in which he does so – why it comes up at that point in the narrative. Why does he need to repeat it three times? The obvious answer is that they don't get it the first or even the second time and third times.

The first occasion (Mark 8:31-38) follows Peter's inspired recognition of Jesus as the Messiah. For some reason Jesus feels the need to caution them that the path he was taking would inevitably lead to his arrest and execution, rather than the brave new world they might have been expecting on the basis of the healings, miracles and the growing crowds following them. When Peter, like a good campaign manager who is afraid of losing votes or lowering party morale, takes Jesus aside to caution him against such talk, Jesus in turn rebukes him. On that occasion Jesus warns them not only of his impending suffering and death, but that they also need to be willing to take up their cross if they are to follow him.

This brings us to tonight's reading, the second occasion when Jesus predicts his death and resurrection. This time none of them was brave enough to ask what he means. So why does he need to repeat the warning here? Perhaps the clue is to be found in the exchange that follows;

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. (Mark 9:33-34)

I like to imagine Jesus casually asking the question, already having a good idea of the answer, and the disciples being a bit sheepish about being found out. At this point Jesus and the disciples seem to inhabit different worlds. We can imagine what might be going through Jesus' mind as he contemplates not only his own impending ordeal, but also that he will be leaving his unfinished mission in their hands of those

who seem to have so little understanding of that mission. The loneliness of Gethsemane is anticipated here.

To the gospel writers' credit, they don't tend to hide or whitewash these all-too-human displays. This is not the first or only time they have wrangled about who is the greatest and what reward they might expect. Matthew's gospel tells us that even the mother of James and John gets in on the act, asking Jesus to let her sons sit on his right and left side when he comes into his kingdom. (Matt 20:21). Then there is Peter's sense of entitlement on the third occasion: 'We have left everything for you', the implication being, 'What's in it for us?' (Mark 10)

Rather than criticising them for wanting to be great, Jesus seeks to re-educate them about what constitutes true greatness:

"Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."  
He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "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 9:35b-37).

These verses came alive in a fresh way for me recently when the photo of a drowned little boy, Aylan Kudi, cast up on a Turkish beach, achieved what previous pleas had not, a more compassionate and generous response to refugees on the part of our government. Somehow this image and the subsequent response throughout the world illustrate the notions of solidarity and vicariousness in Jesus's words about welcoming 'one of these little children in his name'. I am not saying that those who responded with compassion consciously did it 'in Jesus' name' – Christians don't have a monopoly on compassion – but I found myself glad for Jesus' sake and in his name. Certainly the boy represented the human face of refugees, transforming how they were perceived – no longer as invading 'illegals' but vulnerable, desperate human beings in search of sanctuary. Of course there is no guarantee how long this will last, or who will be included.

Returning to the gospel passage, what else are we to understand by his choosing a child to make his point? Although not stated here, in a parallel passage (Matt 18 1-5), Jesus specifies that it is the humility of a child they are to imitate: 'Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven'. Times and child rearing practices have changed. In some households today the children may seem to run the show! Those of us who have had anything to do with children will also know that they are more than capable of sibling rivalry – and it seems to me that the disciples' wrangling for a special place is a form of sibling rivalry and childish grandiosity.

Presumably we are to be child-like, not childish. After all, St Paul says that love means giving up childish ways (1 Cor. 13). So what are the child-like qualities we are to imitate? A capacity for trust? A capacity for wonder, for playfulness, an unselfconscious delight in being who we are? And all being well, that child is still

within us, although he/she may need some excavation.

Yet we may be aware of another child within us – an anxious child who may believe he/she will never get what he/she wants. Or that there is not enough to go round and who therefore needs to compete for his/her place in the sun. You might recognize a link between that not OK child and the notion of the compensatory false self that Merton and others have written about.

It is easy enough to be critical of the rather transparent rivalry and ambition of the disciples. After all we know how the story turns out. But are we any better? We may or may not be as transparent, but who among us has not compared themselves with others?

We live in a competitive world where top jobs and gold medals are limited – and hard to hold onto, as recent political events have shown.

But is there anything wrong with wanting to be the best we can be, or to want our lives to have significance, to make a difference?

You may be familiar with these lines, often attributed to Nelson Mandela, but more likely penned by Marianne Williamson. They remind us that this is not really about individual egos, but that all of us are graced:

We were born to make manifest  
the glory of God that is within us.  
It's not just in some of us  
it's in everyone.  
And as we let our own light shine  
we unconsciously give other people  
permission to do the same.  
As we are liberated from our own fear  
our presence automatically liberates others.

Apparently St Francis would often preach to the creatures reminding them that by their very existence they were giving glory to God (Richard Rohr). In a delightful poem, 'St Francis Blesses the Sow', Galway Kinnell reminds us that sometimes that we forget this is our calling:

*Sometimes it is necessary  
To reteach a thing its loveliness  
... until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing.*

Gerard Manley Hopkins, 19<sup>th</sup> Century poet and priest, who had a wonderful grasp of non-dual ways of thinking, reminds us of our true vocation to give expression to what others have called the true self:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,  
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

Where that happens he concludes:

Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men's faces.  
(From 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire')

As I was reflecting on what I might say tonight about true greatness and how we best serve each other, it came to me that the antidote to envy and competitiveness is to inhabit the life that is ours to live.

Becoming what we are – inhabiting the life that is ours to live – will be our God-given gift to ourselves and to others. It will mean inhabiting our temperament our particular combination of strengths and weaknesses – and the life circumstances in which we find ourselves. I love the word *inhabit* with its multiple meanings, all really grounded and embodied. These include *living in*, being clothed in (e.g. we speak of a monk's habit) and practices we cultivate (e.g. prayer, meditation and mindfulness).

Recognising that God comes disguised as our life (Richard Rohr), we allow our lives to teach and transform us. The natural world and the scriptures remind us that life is constantly changing, is often messy and uncertain – it involves loss and renewal, death and resurrection, uncertainty and creativity. But there is always the hope of new life, and the trust that nothing is wasted – even our failures.

Could this be what it means to take up our cross and follow Christ?

Let me conclude with the words of Michael Leunig, artist, poet and theologian:

That which is Christ-like within us shall be crucified. It shall suffer and be broken. And that which is Christ-like within us shall rise up. It shall love and create. (*When I Talk to You*)