

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

Mark 9:30-37

Introduction

As many of you know I am very fond of cats and choose to always have at least one living with me. I have often had pairs of kittens, male brothers. I like male cats because they are much friendlier and more affectionate than females. Twice in the past we have run into trouble when the boys began to approach adulthood because they began to jostle for position, to establish who was in charge, who was top cat? It has always inevitably had an impact on the wellbeing of one of them. So I promised myself that I would never again have two brothers. However, when I was asked to offer a safe home to my two little feral boys I found myself capitulating.

Inevitably the same pattern has occurred. They are now almost one and one of them is working very hard to be 'Top Cat' to push the other out, to be the most important, to be 'The Greatest'. In some ways this is inevitable. It is a fact of life that whatever the species there is always a hierarchy with someone who is at the top of the tree. It is there in the animal kingdom. It is there in human life. It is there in the world of work, in sports, even socially we see people maneuvering to be the best, the greatest.

But in God's eyes we are all equal and he loves us equally. The disciples in the story were arguing with each other to decide who was the most important. They wanted to know who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Worldly greatness is about status (how important I am) , power (how much do I control) , fame (How well known am I? – how many likes or retweets do I get on social media), riches (How much money and possessions do I have? - David Beckham is worth \$450,million!! But that pales into insignificance beside Elon Musk who is worth 190 billion!) and influence (How much weight do my opinions carry? - can I make people do what I want? We talk a lot now about influencers on YouTube who earn a great deal getting people to act in certain ways, buy certain products, believe certain things.

Jesus has a completely different viewpoint. He tells us that whoever humbles themselves like a little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. There are two accounts of this incident in the Gospels. In Matthew's account Jesus tells his jostling followers,

"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

In our reading this morning the message is reduced to

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³⁷ *"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."*

But the message is clear. In God's kingdom greatness is not about power and recognition it is about service of others, of humility and trust in God. It is about allowing ourselves to be weak and needy and in welcoming those who are considered insignificant and unimportant.

Jesus tells us:

We must be child-like in our approach to God

As children grow up they tend to become more and more confident in their own abilities, power and self-sufficiency. In fact we encourage that as it is part of maturing and becoming an adult. As they get older children have less need or desire to trust and depend on adults, they begin to make their own choices and take care of themselves and this is a natural part of growing up. Little children naturally trust the adults who care for them and expect them to know what is best and provide it for them. Sometimes people begin to find it harder to trust others after a series of letdowns. But Jesus tells us that our dependence and trust in God must remain child-like.

Humility means that we must come when he calls and do as he says because he is totally trustworthy and dependable.

We must be child-like in our approach to God. Not childish. The Bible warns us against petty arguments and lack of mature faith.

We are encouraged to be child-like in humility

Neither seeking to be great nor neglecting our gifts. We should neither put ourselves forward nor ignore the gifts that God has given us to use. God wants us to retain or renew the trust, obedience, dependence and openness to God that can be seen in little children.

Children will put their trust in an adult who they know loves them. They don't require complete intellectual understanding. They go by experience. If a person has shown themselves to care about them and provide what they need they will trust them. Once we know that God loves us we should be able to have this child-like trust without needing to understand all the mysteries of the universe. Our faith and understanding will grow as we mature and develop in our relationship with God but Jesus tells us

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our trust and dependence in him should remain simple and uncomplicated

These things involve a radical change

Jesus tells the disciples they must change, the word he uses means to turn round or be converted. It is a radical change that could be described as being turned inside out. The sort of attitude that God wants from his people is radically different from the cynical and self-sufficient attitudes that we develop as adults. We are called to become children again, not in behaviour but to revert to that open-eyed expectancy that a child has; the ability to learn and develop that a child has; the simple trust that a child has, the obedience that we would like our children to have.

This is the mark of God's people and Jesus himself shows us how we should be. He didn't stand on his dignity or demand special treatment because he was, after all, the creator of the world. He put aside the trappings of Kingship and power and lived very simply and humbly serving others. He was totally obedient to his Father and said "I only do what I see the father doing" he came to serve us and gave himself totally for us when he died on the cross so that we could have a close relationship with God the father.

Jesus knows that children are important. He welcomed them and loved to meet them. He wants us to be confident in our status as God's children and to come to him with the attitudes of childhood.

He also wants us to be generous and welcoming in our attitude to others. It's ironic that the argument the disciples had followed on from Jesus again teaching them that he was going to suffer and die for them. What was in their minds? Was this a diversionary tactic to avoid thinking about what lay ahead? Was it that if Jesus was going to die they all had their eye on 'the main job'?

What might this say to us today? We probably cannot avoid an element of competition and comparison between people, between ourselves and others, in a whole range of everyday things. But are we clear that this has no place in God's kingdom, no place in church life? Are we ever tempted to see ourselves as better than others, or at least not as bad as some? Because if we are, we – like the disciples – have not yet understood. Maybe reflecting on these things again – on the life of Christ, on his humility, his walking and talking with those no-one else wanted to be

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with, his serving others and more – can help us find our greatness...not in ourselves but in him and his life.