

Are you competitive? If you are playing a game, or a sport, do you really believe that it's the taking part that is important, or do you just want to win? Kate and I had a week in Sheringham in Norfolk three weeks or so ago with our grandchildren and their mums. One evening after the children had gone to bed, we were relaxing over a well earned gin and tonic. Emma, one of the mums, got the backgammon set out which she had found in the holiday home and suggested she and I played a game. Now I think backgammon is a wonderful game. I think it must be a vicar game! If any of you watched the ITV series Grantchester, the Rev Sidney Chambers seemed to have a scene in every episode playing backgammon in the pub with Robson Green's character, Detective Inspector Geordie Keating, either solving the case, or a problem in Sidney's life! Backgammon is a game which combines skill and chance. The number of spaces you move is determined by shaking the dice but how you move is where the skill comes in. Just because somebody outscores the other person in dice throws throughout the game doesn't necessarily mean they win. And so Emma and I played backgammon. I suspect I have played more backgammon than her over the years and a couple of times she was making moves and I was thinking you really don't want to be doing that, but I wanted to win so I kept quiet. Yes I did win both games but I like to think that it didn't matter greatly as we both enjoyed the games. But I suggest there's a competitive streak in all of us. Sometimes there are times when that competitive streak matters and there are times when it doesn't. I rather think backgammon on holiday over gin and tonic with your daughter in law is a time when perhaps your competitive streak doesn't matter so much.

But in our gospel reading this morning from Mark's gospel there appears to be a competitive streak coming out amongst the disciples. They had argued with one another about who was the greatest so what on earth is going on here?

Well at the beginning of our passage Jesus was having another go at explaining to the disciples what was going to happen to him. We are in Chapter 9 of Mark's gospel and in chapter 8 of Mark's gospel Jesus had already had a go at telling them that he was going to die and be resurrected again and this time he tries again: "The son of man is to be betrayed into human hands and they will kill him and three days after being killed he will rise again. But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him."

That's interesting isn't it – I wonder why they were afraid to ask him? Perhaps it was because they knew what happened last time they questioned him.

So here, whilst the disciples clearly didn't fully understand what was happening I rather think they understood part of what was going on. The disciples had been called by Jesus to the job of supporting him in his mission, and surely by now, whilst they didn't understand everything that Jesus taught them, they must have understood that there was something very special about him. And what is more, if they were part of his inner circle they must have also understood that there was something at least a bit special about them. OK, so whilst they didn't understand things like, "the son of man is to be betrayed into human hands", and they certainly didn't understand, "and three days after being killed he will rise again", they would have understood that Jesus was saying he was going to be killed and as such the disciples would be beginning to think to themselves, "if Jesus is going to be killed, who's going to take over leading this mission". It could have been quite interesting listening to their argument as to who was the greatest: I'm sure they all thought they had their good points, but whether the others agreed?

But there is one thing about this story which is quite typical of Jesus' ministry - Jesus never asked a question without knowing the answer first. Look at what happened next, "Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?'. But they were silent." They didn't tell him but he knew jolly well what they were arguing about. How do we know that - because it says he sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be

first must be last of all and servant of all." He knew they were arguing about who wanted to be first; they were arguing about who was the greatest among them as that person would be in line to take over. This is a real recurring theme amongst the gospels the idea of this topsy turvy world that Jesus teaches us. Note this then - following Jesus is nothing to do with status: service is much more important than status in the Kingdom of God. What we do rather than what position we hold is what is important. There's nothing wrong with ambition; there's nothing wrong with working jolly hard to get a better job; but status, if we're not careful, can cause us to have a, "me first" mentality and there is no place for that in the Kingdom of God.

Let's go back to what Jesus was saying at the beginning of the passage: "the son of man is to be betrayed into human hands and they will kill him and three days after being killed he will rise again." Jesus foretelling his death again. Last week we had the story of Jesus trying to tell the disciples this and Peter rebuked Jesus for saying this – in effect Peter told Jesus not to talk like this; don't talk about the Messiah being killed; it's wrong. But last week Jesus said get behind me Satan to Peter – which is why they were afraid to question Jesus this time. This time Jesus is giving the same message to the disciples but there is no come back from them. They might not understand what's going on but they must be thinking, "what is this all about?". They must have been thinking, "Surely Jesus can save himself; he saved all these other people; he's performed those miracles." But this sort of reaction is all about the disciples focusing on themselves - yes caring for Jesus their leader but they are not understanding this concept of sacrifice.

And here is the point. Are we really so different from the disciples? Do we really understand what this sacrifice thing is all about? Perhaps God does call us to give up some things in our lives in order to follow him, but God called the disciples to give up just about everything in their lives to follow him. I wonder what we are prepared to sacrifice, to give up, in order to help build God's kingdom in this place.

Jesus then goes for one of his favourite props. "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 not me but the one who sent me." Why a child? Why does he use a child as a prop? Children in those days had less status surrounding them than they do today so that makes it harder for us to understand the use of a child as a prop because people wouldn't see that the child mattered at all. Children today are much loved much cared for, much protected in most cases, certainly in this country, but in those days children were just small people who were at the beginning of their lives: they had no status they had no rights but I guess they also had no expectations of others apart from the parents who they expected to care for them, not because it was their right but because of the natural bonding between the child and the parent. But that's what Jesus is referring to: there should be a natural bonding between us and God. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." This is Jesus almost taking himself out of the equation and saying there is a direct link between children of God and God and we must not let stuff get in the way, we must not let our competitive streaks which can form barriers between people if they are taken too far get in the way; we must not let those competitive streaks get between us and God; we must not let status get between us and God; we must not let anything get between us and God.

The disciples often struggled to understand what Jesus was doing so, when they could pluck up the courage to do so – because they didn't want to admit they didn't understand, they would ask Jesus questions, and listen and try and understand the answers Jesus gave them. When we don't understand something we should be going to God in prayer and if we go to God in prayer and talk to him and leave time to listen to him, he will talk to us. He will make it clear what he expects us to sacrifice in order to truly love and serve him. The reality is that we don't have to sit here this morning and think, "Oh perhaps I could give up that for God" – what we need to be saying is, "Lord what do you want me to do?"

– and then be prepared to do it. That might turn out to be difficult, but what we do know is that if we achieve what God is calling us to do – then it will most definitely have been worth it. So, as we as individuals, and as a church, look forward to discovering what God is calling us to do next, let's go with open listening minds, and open hearts, and open ourselves up to God and say, "We are prepared to do what you ask of us – but as to what that is, now it's over to you".

Amen.