

Truly Great

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on October 17th, 2021 - Mark 10:35-45)

Ian Thorpe, Madam Butterfly, Twiggy Forest, Gina Rinehart, Robert Menzies, Gough Whitlam, Tom Cruise, Nicole Kidman, Gary Ablett, Eddie Betts. These are the kind of people the world seems to think are great. Sure, they have achieved extraordinary things, but are they truly great?

What do you think makes for greatness?

Who do you think of as being truly great? Is it the one who finds a cure for cancer or smallpox? Is it one who uses a little of their huge portfolio to alleviate the distress of others? Or is it the one who quietly pays for the groceries of the person in the supermarket queue in front of them, or welcomes the asylum seeker into their home for a meal or pays for a coffee for a homeless person? Is it the one who is a bit 'showy' or the one, who is more humble and secretive? Or is it a bit of all of this?

In our reading today we find two brothers asking a question, a question that very quickly gets up the noses of the other disciples. James and John are thinking about their futures, weighing up what the last few years had been about. They had been amongst the first of group that Jesus had called to follow him. They had given up their livelihoods and family to go on the road and perhaps now they were looking for a bit of reward or security, They, simply ask, that they, be given places of honour or reward. The other disciples are incensed, not because of the question per se, but the presumptuousness of it, why these two and not one of the others.

Jesus quickly puts them all straight. True greatness is completely different to what they think it is. True greatness is not about power and lording it over another. True greatness is about service. Several times he has reminded his disciples that he would suffer and die. Several times he has tried to answer the question, he has explained to them that true greatness is found in a child. True greatness means putting oneself last and the needs of others first. True greatness is not, as the world sees it, about power and lording it over others which often ends up in tyranny and self-advancement at the expense of others. True greatness is modelled by Jesus who feeds and teaches a hungry crowd when he is exhausted and in need of a rest. True greatness is stooping down and washing the feet of your friends. True greatness means giving your life for others.

Martin Luther King Jr, the great orator and civil rights defender put it this way:

"I know a man – and I just want to talk about him a minute, and maybe you will discover who I am talking about as I go down the way, because he was a great one. And he just went about serving. He was born in an obscure village, the child of a poor peasant woman. And then he grew up in another obscure village, where he worked as a carpenter until he was thirty years old. Then for three years, he just got on his feet, and he was an itinerant preacher. And he went about doing some things. He didn't have much. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never held a family. He never owned a house. He never went to college. He never visited a big city. He never went two hundred miles from where he was born. He did none of the usual things that the world would associate with greatness. He had no credentials but himself. He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against him. They called him a rabble-rouser. They said he was an agitator. He practiced civil disobedience; he broke injunctions. And so he was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. And the irony of it all is that

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his friends turned him over to them. One of his closest friends denied him... ...he stands as the most influential figure that every entered human history... ... (None) have affected the live of man (sic) on this earth as that one solitary life.”¹

Martin Luther King Jr understood what Jesus was trying to tell his disciples. Martin Luther King Jr, emulated this kind of living.

True greatness is serving. True greatness is self-giving. True greatness is putting others first. True greatness involves empathy. True greatness involves compassion.

Jesus calls us to follow in this way. A life for others, a life of humility that will bring with it its own joys.

Who and how will we serve the community after lockdown? Who and how will we Footscray Baptist Church serve the community after lockdown? How will we serve those looking for company after we emerge from lockdown? How will we serve those looking for work once government grants come to an end? How will we serve those who get kicked out of hotels once housing funding dries up? How will we serve those who come and use the services of Orange Sky? How will we serve those that are sick or dying from this wretched virus or other illness? How will we serve those who sit on our hard concrete steps looking for safety? How will we serve those who feel vulnerable or fearful of getting out and about?

In the words of the song we sometimes sing, who will we hold the Christ light in their time of fear for? Whose hand will we hold, to whom will we speak peace, with whom will we laugh and weep, whose joys and sorrows will we share?

Serving others might be risky but true service is never done with a grudging heart. True service will bring great joy. Amen.

¹ From the sermon 'The Drum Major Instinct' by Martin Luther King Jr.