

G.O.A.T (Greatest of All Time)

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at FBC, October 20th, 2024, Mark 10:35-45)

I wonder if you have heard the term G.O.A.T. It seems to have become part of everyday speech in recent years. As the footy season has drawn to a close and now that Rafal Nadal has announced his retirement we have been drawn into the debates about G.O.A.T. Was Rafa the greatest of all time? Or was it Federer or perhaps it was Djokovic?. As AFL players have retired, we see the same discussion – was Dusty Martin the greatest of all time?

Now it is relatively easier to pick G.O.A.T footballers or tennis players or cricketers, the media is quick to help us in the task.

Could you name the greatest of all time actor or actress, TV personality, singer or band (Midnight Oil would win that one for me). What about artist, musician or journalist? Following the death of George Negus this week, many would say he was the greatest journalist.

Greatness seems to mean most successful in worldly terms in our culture. The greatest businessperson usually means the one who has made the most money. As I look at the conflict in the Middle East, judgements are made about who has the greatest defence force – which usually means who can kill the most people the most efficiently.

During COVID times we changed the dial a bit and started to think about doctors, nurses, ambulance officers as the greatest. I don't know about you, but, as I look at the conflicts around the world I think doctors, nurses and humanitarian workers are the greatest of all time.

I wonder how we would go if we were asked to name the greatest person? What would be our criteria? How would we make that judgement? Who would we say was the greatest follower of Jesus? One of the disciples, Billy Graham, Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King Jr? Perhaps you would name someone else.

At first glance, our reading today seems to be about squabbling about who should be the greatest, about rivalry and jealousy.

We have two brothers behaving like three-year-olds, wanting a favour from Jesus, perhaps trying to be a bit too big for their britches. They want to sit on the left and right of Jesus in glory. Now I don't know which is better the left or the right, but they seem to be wanting to occupy places of honour. Their ambition is there for all to see. This request is even the more stunning given Jesus has just talked, several times, about what will happen to him as he gets closer to Jerusalem, how he will suffer and die.

When the other disciples get wind of the request, they are furious. How dare these two brothers ask this? Their jealousy rises to the surface. Why are they so angry? Did they want those positions for themselves and are simply cross that James and John got in first.

Jesus brings them all down to size. He is not cross that James and John have made the request, he simply says he is not in a position to grant it. He wants them to really understand what they are asking. He seems to be more cross at the other ten, who got angry with James and John for asking, so he provides them and us a lesson on greatness.

Greatness for Jesus is not about power, it is about empowering. Jesus highlights the system operating in his world and I think we can say the same system operates in our culture. Our cultures seem to think greatness is about power, success, domination and reward. People strive for such power.

Jesus identifies such a system as being the opposite to what he thinks it should be. Such power needs disempowered and powerless people, this should not be so. Jesus turns this system upside down, he subverts the system.

Greatness for Jesus is using any authority, power or influence you might have in service for others. Greatness is about humility, sacrifice and service. Greatness is servant hood.

However, Jesus is not looking for subservience – being a servant/slave is not about subservience rather it is about joining Jesus. His lifestyle and mission is not so much about power, but more about compassion and caring and freedom.

Greatness in Jesus's world of reversal is about turning the other cheek, being peacemakers, seeking justice, offering forgiveness, letting waters of compassion flow, caring for the least, welcoming strangers, offering dignity to all.

Jesus is our model of greatness – it will mean putting our body on the line, suffering and enduring persecution, putting others first. This is why he is concerned that James and John really understand the implications of their request. Are they ready to share in the cup and baptism of Jesus. Are they ready to share in the suffering that following Jesus will involve? This life will be risky, difficult, dangerous and uncomfortable, he needs to check they are ready for that. Are we?

Jesus redefines power and greatness. Greatness is servanthood – putting others first, being vulnerable, empowering others – letting others shine, putting other's wellbeing on the same level as ours. It is about freeing others, showing empathy, it is a new way of being.

Being truly great will mean any notions of greatness are irrelevant.

Jesus listens to the request of James and John but then challenges them to think about what it really means. Do they really want to be on the left and right of Jesus? Ironically the ones who end up on the left and right of Jesus are two criminals.

Do we find ourselves mirrored in this story? Do we seek recognition? Are we jealous of others? Do we need to check our own desire for power? Do we hear Jesus saying to us that if you follow me, you are called to turn everything upside down, and that will take you to some risky places?

Jesus' call to servanthood will set us free from systems that dehumanize and terrorise, tyrannize, will set us free from captivity to the systems of this world.

Jesus calls us **all** to servant leadership, to empower others, to letting them shine, turning notions of greatness on their head.

Jesus is our G.O.A.T, he is the greatest of all time. He came to serve and not to be served, to give it all for many. Let's follow his example.