

Numero Uno

Mark 9:33-37; Mark 10:35-45

5th after Epiphany

7th February 2010

A tiny two-passenger Smart Car pulls alongside a Cadillac at the traffic lights. "I'll bet you don't have a satellite navigation system in your car," says the driver to the man in the Cadillac. "Of course I do," replies the haughty deluxe-car driver. "Well, I'll bet you don't have a high definition, plasma TV like me?" answers the Smart Car driver. The driver in the Cadillac sighs. "Don't be stupid, I have a 50 inch flat screen right back here." Not to be outdone, the Smart Car fellow says, "Betcha don't have a double bed in there?" Ashen-faced, the Cadillac driver speeds off. A week later, the Cadillac driver sees the Smart Car parked on the side of the road, back windows fogged up and steam pouring out. The driver pulls over, gets out of the Cadillac and bangs on the Smart Car's window until the driver sticks his head out. "Not only do I now have a double bed but it's also a king-sized ultramatic," brags the Cadillac driver. The Smart Car driver is not impressed. "You mean," he asks, "you just got me out of the shower to tell me that?"

A stupid story, maybe, but it reminds us well how so many people always want to be one-up on the others, to have the biggest and the best, whether it's cars or houses or clothes or jewellery – in the belief that, at the end of the day, the person with the most toys wins the game of life.

But the Numero Uno Syndrome not just about having more material possessions. It's about being the best personally. Being the most successful, the greatest, the winner. And being able to remind others of that fact. I remember as children growing up in Scotland, we used to sing out tauntingly, "I'm the king of the castle and you're the dirty wee rascal!"

Isn't that what motivates so many sports stars today? Being the best, being the greatest, winning the gold medal, breaking the world record? We often think it's about the money but I think it's more about the glory. Showing others you are top of the heap, the best of all times, Numero Uno.

Isn't that what motivates the teams and their players in the Superbowl? Of course, there's a lot of money at stake in tonight's game, but don't the New Orleans Saints and the Indianapolis Colts both want to show that they are top dog in American Pro Football, with all the glory and the bragging rights that goes with it.

In his book, *The Positive Power Of Praising People*, Jerry Twentier, suggests as an experiment that we pick our favourite professional football team. Assume we offer each player a 20% increase in contract pay with two restrictions: First, absolutely no fans are allowed in the stadium during the game and, second, that there be no press coverage

during or after the game. Professional football would die immediately, he says, because the players would be robbed of their greatest motivation: the recognition that comes from achievement. Without the fans and the publicity, in other words, there would be no glory, no mantle of greatness to be won.¹

I remember a few years ago, the Italian soccer team, Roma FC, were ordered to play three of their Champions League fixtures in an empty stadium. During a previous game, the referee was hit by a coin thrown by an unruly fan and so, as punishment, the European soccer authority, UEFA, decided that there would be no fans, no publicity, no TV during their next games. The 73,000 capacity stadium in Rome was absolutely empty and all the players said it was the worst experience of their professional lives. And it's the same for most sports stars, if there's no glory, no greatness to be achieved, then what's the point?

Such motivating factors are, of course, as old as the hills. And if not the hills, certainly as old as the Bible. James and John, the disciples of Jesus being no exception. Having given up everything to follow this Galilean teacher, now they wanted their reward. Not just earthly recognition and respect but eternal power and everlasting glory. "When you sit on your throne in your glorious Kingdom," they said to Jesus, "we want you to let us sit with you, one at your right and one at your left."² In other words, Lord, if you are like the Prime Minister in heaven, let one of us be Minister of Angelic Affairs and the other be Minister for Netherworld Relations.

The tragedy is that James and John were so focused on their own power and glory in this whole matter that they did not appreciate the crudeness and untimeliness of their request. Until Jesus said to them. "You don't know what you're asking. Can you drink the cup of suffering I must drink? Can you be baptised in the way I must be baptised?"³ Far from being a place of privilege, says Jesus, the Kingdom of God is only to be entered by suffering and denial, by enduring pain and persecution rather than by means of popularity and prominence. And, as he had mentioned to them on a previous occasion, the Kingdom was only open to those who were happy with the lowest and least presumptuous places in life – just like the unpretentious and unassuming children playing in the streets around them.

Mind you, before we come down too heavily on the disciples for their churlish and ill-timed behaviour, let's be honest. Are we not also often tempted by power and glory? Don't we get a tad upset if people omit to give us our proper place and recognition, say, in the volunteer association or

the lodge or in the service organisation or in church? Don't we positively glow when we have our egos stroked and good deeds brought to public attention? No, it was not just the disciples of old who revelled in opportunities for power and glory. Human nature being what it is, we today are just as greatly tempted and just as often succumb.

That's not to say, of course, that we should not seek to live great lives, or be great people, or achieve great things in the world. But the kind of greatness to which we should aspire is much different from the secular understanding of this goal. True greatness is greatness as defined by Jesus, greatness turned upside down on its head, greatness in all its paradoxical difference, greatness viewed from a completely different perspective.

True greatness in the eyes of Jesus is, for instance, greatness that comes from adopting a childlike way of looking at the world. Not childish but childlike. Full of innocence and honesty. A Sunday school teacher in London, England, had been telling a class of little boys about crowns of glory and heavenly rewards for good people. "Now tell me," the teacher said at the close of the lesson, "in heaven, who will get the biggest crown?" There was silence for a while then Johnny replied in his broad Cockney accent, "Sir, the biggest crown will be for 'im what's got the biggest 'ead!"⁴

True greatness also comes from mirroring the unrestrained joy and love that children so often show. Not the kind of adult love usually so measured and controlled. But the spontaneous delight and affection children display. In one of Lynn Johnston's *For Better or Worse* cartoons, the little girl, Elizabeth, comes over to her father, who is lying on the couch. "What's the matter, Daddy?" she asks. "I don't know kiddo. I don't know if I'm bored or tired or depressed," Daddy answers. Elizabeth says reassuringly, "Everybody feels like that sometimes, Daddy. It's nothing to worry about." Daddy responds, "What do you think you are? A doctor?" Elizabeth says, "No but I wrote you a 'perstripshun'." Her father smiles as he reads the note, then little Elizabeth puts her arms round Daddy. At which he says, "I feel so much better now." Mom comes in and Dad hands her the 'perstripshun' which reads "Take two hugs and call me in the morning."⁵ Ah yes, children have so much to teach us about life. And the more we learn to think with their childlike minds, the more we attain to true greatness.

True greatness also comes not when we arrange and organise life so that we are top dog and others serve our every need, but when we do the very reverse. When we become the lowest and the least and concentrate on serving other people. "If you want to be great," Jesus tells us, "you must be the servant of the rest, and if you want to be first, you must be the slave of all."⁶

Writer, King Duncan, tells how, one day, a hospital nurse saw a tired, anxious young man outside the room of an elderly patient. So she took his arm, ushered him to the

old man's bedside, stooped down and whispered in his ear, "Your son is here." The heavily sedated patient reached out his hand, and the young man tightly wrapped his fingers around it, squeezing a message of encouragement. The nurse brought a chair to the bedside and, all through the night, the young man sat there, holding the old man's hand, and offering gentle words of hope. As dawn approached, the patient died and, placing his lifeless hand on the bed, the young man went to notify the nurse who offered words of sympathy on the death of his father. "Oh no, that's not my father," he said. "In fact, I've never seen him before in my life." Horrified, the nurse asked, "Then why didn't you say something when I took you to him?" The young man smiled, "Because I sensed that he really needed his son, and if his son wasn't here, I would be a son to him and that would be the best way to help him." Duncan concludes, "That young man had a servant's touch. He became an instrument of the Incarnation and Christ entered that hospital room through Him."⁷

True greatness comes, then, not as we amass wealth or power or prestige. Not because of any position we hold or popularity we have cultivated. True greatness comes when we seek to serve others. True greatness comes, further, when the greatness of Jesus shines through in the deeds of service we do. True greatness comes not from within ourselves but from serving others in the name and with the strength of him who is truly great.

And this is important to know because so often we anxiously wonder how our lives will stack up at the end of the day. Will we have lived a life that amounts to anything or one that will just be whisked away by the ever-rolling stream of time, soon to be forgotten?

Let's take heart, though. For if we have lived our life, sincerely seeking to serve others, placing their needs above our own, attempting to reflect the love of Christ in all we do, then we can be assured that we will have lived a life that, in the eyes of God, is not only a good life but one that is truly great. And one that will gain his seal of approval as we hear him saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord."⁸

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¹ Jerry Twentier, *The Positive Power of Praising People*, Contemporary Books, June 1998; King Duncan, *A Place of Honor*, www.eSermons.com

² Mark 10:37

³ Mark 10:38

⁴ Duncan, *op.cit.*

⁵ Lynn Johnston, *For Better or For Worse*, http://www.fborfw.com/strip_fix; King Duncan, *Jesus' Object Lesson*, www.eSermons.com

⁶ Mark 10:43

⁷ King Duncan, *A Place of Honor*

⁸ Matthew 25:23