

Let's play a guessing game. Who is *the greatest*?

Who is the *greatest footballer ever*? Pele / Maradona / Cruyff / George Best

Who won the *greatest number of Olympic Gold medals ever*? 8 medals. Michael Phelps for swimming.

Who was the *greatest boxer* of all time? Mohammed Ali. Better known as "The Greatest."

Who was the *greatest scientist* of this century? Albert Einstein?

Which singing pop group sold the *greatest number platinum albums*? The Beatles.

Who do Americans say was the *greatest American president*? Abraham Lincoln in today's polls.

The list of "greats" and "greatests" goes on and on.

It is one thing to BE the greatest Olympian, to BE the greatest boxer, to BE the greatest scientist, to BE the greatest president. But it is quite another thing to *have a need* to be great, to *have a need* to be number one, have a need to be a big shot, a need to be better than others. That is what the gospel lesson is all about today. These disciples had a need to be number one, the best of the disciples, better than all the others. These disciples had a need to be the right hand man. It amazes me that these two who were the closest to Jesus spent so much time with him, they saw his miracles and everything else that he did but they still didn't get what he was about. They did not get it that Jesus, the greatest person in the kingdom of God was actually the person who had the heart of a servant.

Let's put this story into context... James and John seemed to be the two who were closest to Jesus and it was the two of them, along with Peter, that he took up onto the mountain where they experienced the transfiguration where Jesus' face shown like the sun. Moses and Elijah were also there. So Peter James and John were on top of the world. They had the greatest religious experience ever. Meanwhile, the other nine disciples who remained down in the valley had tried to heal a boy who kept having fits which made him throw himself into the fire, but try as they might, they couldn't heal him. Jesus then came down off the mountain and *he* healed the boy and then told them all off for their lack of faith and healing power.

Shortly after this, the disciples were walking home together to Capernaum. It was a long walk and there was plenty of time to talk. While they were walking along, the twelve disciples got into an argument about which disciples were the greatest. The Bible text doesn't say it, but I think it was James and John, who were causing the conflict. Now I have a feeling it was those two who had been on the top of the mountain and had the great religious experience of the transfiguration while the rest of them couldn't even heal the sick boy. James and John, with their mountain top experience, felt that they were superior to the other nine disciples. Can you imagine how they all felt when they realised that Jesus had heard them arguing with one another. And when he asked them what they were talking about they were all quiet because they were just a bit embarrassed and probably ashamed of their conversation.

Then Jesus told them, "If anyone wants to be first, they must be the very last of all and the servant of all." Then he took a child up into his arms and said, "Unless you turn around from your self centred ways and glory seeking ways and become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven, because it is the one who humbles himself like this little child who gets to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

But did they "get it?" I think not. James and John didn't get the simple lesson that Jesus was trying to teach them. Jesus said so clearly, "If anyone wants to be great, he must be last of all and servant of all." But they didn't get what Jesus was all about at all!

So what are we to make of these two? And what do you think about the day they went to

Jesus and said to him: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And when Jesus answered, "What is it you want me to do for you?" They replied: "Let us sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, when you come again in glory."

How do you react to that? Anger and resentment was the reaction from the other ten disciples towards James and John.

How should we think about these two who were so forward that they not only wanted to stand out from the crowd, they also wanted to stand ahead of the others and have the highest positions of power and privilege that they believed Jesus could grant them?

But what are your reactions, your thoughts, and your feelings towards these two rather bold characters? How arrogant! How self centred! "Jesus we want you to do what ever we ask of you"! Who do they think they are?

My thought is that we should regard James and John as if they were us. They really do sound very much like some of us. Therefore, we should give close attention to what Jesus had to say to them and to the other disciples since he is also speaking to you and me. Jesus said, "What do you want me to do for you then?" He asked these two disciples that question and asks us that question as well, "What do you really want from me?" Well The truth finally came out for James and John. They wanted glory. They wanted power, status, and authority. Jesus then taught them. "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant. Whoever wishes to be first among you must be a slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." But obviously, James and John still didn't "get it." The same is true of us. We too can be followers of Jesus. Walk with Jesus. Talk with Jesus. Hang out with Jesus' friends and still not "get it" about being a servant of others. We can use the right religious buzz words and go to church and attend confirmation, but still not get that basic lesson of life that Jesus was trying to teach James and John and all of us. The greatest person in God's sight is a person who has a heart of humble service towards God and others. A servant always has a loving heart and working hands. *Both the heart and the hands*; not just the heart of a servant who sees the needs of others. Not just a heart who feels the pain of those who lost their homes to hurricanes. Not just a heart to empathize with those who have lost their jobs, income and insurance. Servants always have good, loving and generous hearts, but they also have hands to do the dirty work. Hands that make all the meals, hands that clean up the tables, hands that do the dishes, hands that actually help people in their needs - heart and hands working together.

In the gospel text for today, Jesus said that whoever is great among you, **MUST** be a servant. You cannot be a disciple of Jesus without being a servant, without having the heart and hands of a servant. Being a servant is a **MUST**, a demand, like water being wet and fire being hot and ice being cold. So a follower of Christ **MUST** be a servant.

Notice in the gospel text for today that Jesus invites us to be servants **OF ALL**, and we focus on the two words, **OF ALL**. What does that mean for you and me? Practically. Actually. In real life.

For me, living a life of a servant is also the essence of what it means to be a human being. Many great human beings throughout the history of the planet are those people who have served the needs of others, who have played their part in trying to end world poverty, who have fought for justice and equality. I love Jesus Christ. He was profound in the way he lived and died. He was profound in all that he taught us about God. The words that Jesus gives to us today are the best advice that anyone could ever give: Whoever wants to be great **MUST** be a servant of all. Amen.