

## I Am The Greatest

17<sup>th</sup> After Trinity: 10.30 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2024  
Parish Comm'n: St James Church Alderholt  
Readings: Jeremiah 11:18-20  
Mark 9:30-37

### Sermon:

Opening Prayer: Lord, we thank you for the gift of your Word. As we think on these things open our hearts and minds to hear and act on your word to us today. Amen.

What did Herod the Great, Alexander the Great, Peter the Great and Gregory the Great all have in common? That's a silly question really – the answer is obviously that they all had 'The Great' as the ending to their title.

It's not hard to come up with any number of 'great' historical figures: 'Herod the Great' was King of Judea at the time Jesus was born; 'Gregory the Great' was the Bishop of Rome in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century; 'Alfred the Great' was King of Wessex from 871 – 899; 'Peter the Great' was the Tsar of Russia from 1672 – 1725, and 'Catharine the Great' was the Empress of Russia from 1729 – 1796. We could come up with a host of other 'great' men and women throughout history, but the point I'm making is that all those people of history wanted to be recognised as 'great'.

Psychologists tell us that deep down we all aspire to be 'great'! Well, I don't know about you but ... 'David the Great' ... somehow doesn't seem to work. Even King David didn't call himself 'David the Great'! How about 'Vernon the Great'? Sorry Vernon, but I couldn't come up with any historically great 'Vernon' characters. What about 'Silvia the Great' Well, even Silvia the Queen of Sweden doesn't call herself 'Silvia the Great'. It all sounds a bit daft to me, but even if we don't obtain the title, we might nonetheless like to be perceived as 'great' or at least 'pretty good'. And not just great or good at what we do, but also who we are. This is the issue in today's Gospel reading where some of the disciples want to be the greatest among them.

Those psychologists pop up everywhere, here they are again, this time telling us that we human beings need to be significant. Well, maybe they have a point there. I doubt if any of us want to live our life as a 'nobody' and die in obscurity, being remembered for – nothing. No, we want our life to count for something. We want to be remembered for something and be recognised as a 'somebody'.

Looking back in recent history, there were people who liked to be called the greatest – but one person making this claim stands out. He often told the world, “I float like a butterfly and sting like a bee”. He was, of course, the boxer Cassius Clay, or Mohamed Ali to use his Muslim name. “I am the Greatest” was his boast – and perhaps he was ‘the greatest – boxer’! But, for many of us lesser mortals, we may have settled for securing big jobs for ourselves so that we could earn big salaries and live in big houses, because, if we can't be ‘great’, we can at least be ‘big’. But no – we ‘need’ to be great – because psychologists tell us that's part of human nature. However, psychologists are for ever changing their minds aren't they – Freud being a classic example.

OK, I think it would be a ... ‘great’ idea to return now to our Gospel passage. It opens with Jesus sharing some quiet time with his disciples to explain his pending trial and execution; but as was often the case, the disciples didn't understand the significance of what he was saying. Instead, they got into a heated argument about who would be the greatest among them – who would be the next leader. When Jesus asked them what the argument was about, they refused to speak; but he knew anyway. So, he gave them the words that form one of the greatest principles of Christianity,

‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’

It shouldn't really surprise us to find that the disciples of Jesus, even in the middle of a discussion about their masters impending suffering and death, were discussing amongst themselves which one of them was the greatest. But how did Jesus respond to this? He placed a child in front of them and said, "Whoever welcomes a child like this in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Jesus offers the child as an example to them? Elsewhere he has told his disciples, "Unless you become like

little children, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God" – *Matthew 18:3*. But Jesus is not saying here that they should act like little children – rather, they should be open like children and accept them as they are.

The whole point is that the child is not great – especially in the society in which Jesus lived, where children had very little worth. They were considered to be weak, vulnerable, needy, and contributing nothing to society. Children were always the first to suffer from famine, disease, war and dislocation. Infant mortality rates were high, with up to 60 per cent of children in those regions not making it to their 16th birthday! 60%! They had no status at all until they achieved maturity when they became accepted in society and were eligible to inherit the family estate. Yet Jesus said, "These are the people you need to identify with. These are the ones who need you. These are the ones you need to receive and welcome – because when you receive them you receive me, and when you receive me, you receive not only me but the one who sent me!

OK, we want to be significant, perhaps powerful too; but Jesus always favoured the marginalised, the vulnerable, the insignificant, the powerless. He tells us that "If anyone wants to be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."

Jesus, of course, doesn't just teach us this in words; he exemplifies it and is the role model on which our standards should be based. Even when we want to be faithful to Jesus, it's only natural that we might want to be thought of as someone who is significant too! Our problem is that if we abuse our position this will not be compatible with the Gospel; in fact, promoting the strong at the expense of the weak is something more akin to Nazism.

When we hear the word 'Nazi' we think of the holocaust of WW2 – with its obsessive persecution, violence and murder, and we are rightly horrified; but what we are inclined to forget is that Nazism was founded 20 years before the start of WW2, in 1919 after the Germans were defeated in WW1. The early Nazi philosophy, or ideology aimed at restoring German greatness by persecuting those who they blamed for the WW1 defeat – the socialists and the Jews.

This early Nazi philosophy runs in exactly the opposite direction to the way of the Cross and those of us who

choose to follow Jesus down that road must always reject and challenge extreme worldly ambition and the lust for power – as we see with Putin and his war on Ukraine.

Ambition in itself is not wrong of course, it's extremism that is counter-Christian. We must open our hearts to the weak and the vulnerable, sharing our time, talents and good fortune with those who are in need. And we should recognise that when we open ourselves to them, we receive Jesus in the process!

I'm going to close, as we should always do, by leaving the last words to Jesus:

"If anyone wants to be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." *Pause .....* Amen.