

Meet Jesus, Find Greatness

Mark 10:32-52

My favourite Olympics was the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics
It's where Australia won our first ever Gold Medal at a Winter Olympics
When everyone famously fell over in the short track speed skating final
Except our hero Steve Bradbury who was the only man standing
He looked so shocked when he won

Our second gold medal came via Alisa Camplin
Who in spite of serious injuries
Courageously won the aerial ski jump to claim gold at her first Olympics
And so at the age of 27 she achieved ultimate greatness in her sport
And I love this fact in our household
Because my wife Emma actually went to school with Alisa Camplin
They were in the same year level
And so there have been times over the years
When I have reminded Emma
"So Alisa Camplin won a gold medal at 27"
"What have you done with your life?"
So unkind.
The things my wife puts up with.
But honestly, I could ask myself the same question
What greatness have I achieved in my life?
I turned 51 this past week
And at the same age of 51
Steve Jobs created the iPhone
And the smartphone has completely revolutionised our use of technology
So that I could sit on the couch
And waste my life playing candy crush
Level 8000 by the way

The world defines greatness by the following areas
Power – how much money or physical strength or political authority do I have?
Status – how many people look up to me and are envious of me?
Influence – how many likes, subscribers, followers do I have?
Achievement – how many titles, degrees, jobs, medals and trophies have I acquired?
Legacy – will people remember me when I'm gone?
I don't think I'm alone when I look at this
And wonder have I really achieved any greatness at all
And time is running out, at least for me

But is this really the greatness we should be pursuing?
Maybe there is a better way?

In this passage in Mark's gospel
Two brothers are going to bring their worldly greatness to Jesus
And then Jesus is going to present his version of greatness
Which is this

True greatness means being served by Jesus to serve like Jesus.

Let's look at the first part of that.
If you want to understand what it means to be served by Jesus
The cross is the key to understanding this

We're told that Jesus is marching towards Jerusalem
The headquarters of all Jesus' opponents
Who have been plotting his death since chapter 3
And those watching Jesus walk resolutely towards the capital
Are afraid and astonished
Because they knew what the Jewish and Roman authorities are capable of
The cross was a symbol of horrifying execution
And as if to clear up any misunderstanding
Jesus pulls his disciples aside to speak of the cross

Verse 33

"See, we are going up to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death. Then they will hand him over to the Gentiles, ³⁴and they will mock him, spit on him, flog him, and kill him, and he will rise after three days."

This is the clearest prediction of Jesus's death in Mark's gospel
But it's not the first time Jesus has spoken about his own death
In fact it's the third time Jesus has predicted the cross
But why is the cross so important to Jesus.

Jump down to verse 45

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

This is one of the most important verses in the gospel of Mark
And it is the key to understanding Jesus
Let's unpack it
For even the *Son of Man*
Two weeks ago I explained that the phrase Son of Man
Came from a vision of the prophet Daniel
Where the Son of Man was given all authority to rule by God
The Ancient of Days
And really the phrase Son of Man could be translated as God's chosen King
So someone with immense power and status given by God
And notice there it says in Daniel 7 that everyone in the earth should serve Him
That is how great He is.

But look at what Jesus does with this title Son of Man
Even though The Son of Man should be served as God's King
But instead Jesus says,
The Son of Man came not to be served as the King
But to serve as a servant
And the expression of that service is the cross of Christ
Where Jesus died for people as a ransom for the sins of many
And this picks up another ancient prophecy from the prophet Isaiah

Regarding the suffering servant of God

Chapter 53 verse 11

After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.

That word iniquities is another word for sins
The suffering servant is able to pay the price of the sins of others
So that they can be justified before God

So if you put all that together
The cross represents the final destination of the mission of Jesus
And the clearest understanding of his identity
Jesus is the suffering Servant King of God
Given all power and authority in the universe
But he trades the crown for a cross
He gives up his power in order to die on the cross for sinners like you and me
The cross says that God is serious about judgement for evil in the world
But that He is also serious about the sin that you and I commit against Him and others
But the cross says that God is equally serious about mercy
Jesus is willing to be a ransom for us
A substitute in our place so that we should not die for our sin
But rather that we might be forgiven by God and justified before Him

So if Jesus really has come as God's Servant King
It raises the question

Do you know your need to be served by Jesus?

If sin is as serious a problem as the Bible says
If it requires God's chosen King to die for us on the cross
Then there really is no other option
than to humble yourself and to be served by Jesus

That's really hard to do when you're self-reliant
When you're ambitious and driven to succeed
When you think you can be good enough based on your own efforts
But none of us are good enough
Each one of us has fallen short of God's glory
We have sinned against God
And we need Jesus to serve us through his death on the cross.

James and John were two of Jesus' closest disciples
These two brothers were young and driven
Scholars believe that John the younger brother was a teenager
And James was in his early 20s when they started to follow Jesus
By this stage, these two brothers had given three years of their lives to following Jesus
They had left their family fishing business
And now they came to Jesus with greater ambitions

Verse 35

³⁵ James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approached him and said, "Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask you."

Just for a start, if anyone comes up to you and says to you
“I want you to do whatever I ask”
Run. Just run away as far as you can.
Because nothing good will come with a request like this
Remember, Jesus has just told them that he’s going to be horribly killed
And this is what they come up with after that
Incredibly insensitive at best and manipulative at worst

Jesus is very patient with them
If it were me, I would give them both a clip behind the ears
But Jesus asks them

Verse 36

³⁶ “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked them.

³⁷ They answered him, “Allow us to sit at your right and at your left in your glory.”

And there it is.
The world’s idea of greatness.
These two young, ambitious brothers have seen an opening
And they are taking it.
They’re making their pitch to Jesus
Like two contestants on Shark Tank
They’ve seen the awesome power of Jesus
To drive out demons, to heal sickness, to calm storms
And with Jesus heading to the capital Jerusalem
They think that any opponent of Jesus
Will be no match for him.
Whether it be the Jewish leaders, or the Roman occupiers
Jesus – the messiah will drive them all out
And they want in on the action
For these brothers, Jesus could never be the suffering Servant King
He could never die
For them he is the Triumphant Warrior King
The one who will overthrow the Jewish leaders and Romans
They want to be Jesus’ generals at his left and right
Status and power is what they want
They’re getting ready to put their red hats on
With the slogan: Make Israel great again.
Because this is what worldly greatness is all about
Winning at life
Being number one
Achieving greatness and glory
Whatever the cost

And it’s not just James and John

Verse 41

⁴¹ When the ten disciples heard this, they began to be indignant with James and John.

Why were they indignant?
Because James and John beat them to it.

And this is not the first time they had this conversation
Back in chapter 9
After the second prediction of the cross
Jesus caught the disciples arguing with one another
About who amongst them was the greatest
Which is usually what happens when you get a group of guys together
But what's so wrong about a bit of healthy competition?
What's so wrong with a bit of ego and ambition?

Andrew and Tristan Tate are two brothers who embody worldly greatness
Older brother Andrew is a world kick boxing champion
Successful businessman and internet personality
Together they run the website called "hustler's university"
Where they teach men how to make money, get disciplined and get fit

This is what Andrew Tate writes in his book entitled "The Tate Bible"
I'm not kidding, that's what the book is actually called
"If you're going to go through your life and you have to associate with people, what you want to do is find egotistical people. Find out if they have a reason to justify their egos. if they can't, then get rid of them. If they do, then hang around them, because you might actually learn something."

Advice like this is
Has been hugely popular amongst young men looking for strength and purpose
Who have been disappointed by wokeness
But there is a dark side to their version of greatness
While they proclaim that women should be provided for and protected
Their version of greatness controls and dominates women
Both men are facing charges of raping and trafficking women in Romania and the UK

Worldly greatness destroys relationships
It's already happening amongst Jesus' disciples
There are winners and losers
People are either seen as competition or a means to an end
And none of this is surprising.

Jesus said this to his disciples in verse 42
⁴² Jesus called them over and said to them, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them.

It was true in Jesus' day
And it still holds true
Worldly greatness results in using people
Controlling them, competing with them, dominating them for your own agenda
Worldly greatness does not bring about the world that you and I want to live in

My son plays soccer in a churches soccer league
And this is the noticeboard they put out at each game to remind parents
Let me read it to you
Please remember
This is a game...so stop taking it so seriously

Kids are watching...so set an example by not shouting abuse and swearing
The coaches are volunteers...so stop blaming them for not treating your child like a god
The referees are human...and can make mistakes so don't abuse them
We are here to have fun...you could have fooled me
And all of this is building up to the last one
Your child is not being scouted by the A-League today
So stop living your dreams through your child
There's the worldly greatness shining through
But you know if the A League really was scouting,
My son is pretty good you know
The fact that they have to make a sign like that
For the churches soccer league
We've got a problem with worldly greatness don't we?

I want you to be honest with yourself
Look inside you
Identify the traits of worldly greatness within you
Every time a friend posts their photos on social media
And you are filled with jealousy when their holidays look better than yours
When they beat you to marriage and having kids
When their kids are smarter and higher achieving than yours
When they get that promotion or pay rise and you don't
"I'm so happy for you"
But all you can feel is the rage inside
Worldly greatness leads to sin
The destruction of relationship with others and with God
It will not bring about the peace and joy we long for

True greatness means being served by Jesus
Bring your ambition, your pride, your arrogance and lay them at the cross
Bring your willingness to use others, to control them, to dominate them
And lay these sins at the foot of the cross
For even the Son of Man
The greatest one who ever lived
Did not come to be served
But to be a Suffering Servant
And to give his life as a ransom for you.

Do you know your need to be served by Jesus?

But here's the second part of true greatness
Once you've been served by Jesus
You need to serve like Jesus
For the Son of Man on the cross
Provides those who follow him with an example to imitate

Verse 42

⁴³ But it is not so among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first among you will be a slave to all.

Notice that Jesus doesn't tell the disciples *not* to strive for greatness

No he wants them to strive for greatness
But greatness in the kingdom of God
Is the complete inversion of worldly greatness
Servants and slaves are normally inferior and looked down on
Worldly greatness has no room for such people except to be used and abused
But for Jesus, status is not important
Those who serve and sacrifice for the sake others
Hold the positions of true greatness
And that makes sense
For Jesus himself is the Suffering Servant King.
And Jesus reminds James and John that to follow Jesus
Is to be willing to suffer for the sake of others
To put the needs of others before yourself
That's what he means when he says that James and John will drink a cup like Jesus
A cup of suffering
And they will be baptized with a baptism of suffering not *exactly* like Jesus on the cross
But each of the apostles would suffer and die for the sake of following Jesus
They didn't realise it at the time
But James would be the first of Jesus's disciples killed in ten years time

When Neil Chambers was the senior pastor of this church
One of the things that stood out to people
Was Neil's willingness to serve and to do very lowly jobs
If the bins were full
It was not uncommon to see Neil jumping inside the bins
To squash whatever was inside to make room for more rubbish
I saw people taking photos of Neil doing this
And I had people comment to me that religious leaders
Where they came from
Would never be seen doing such a thing
Can you imagine a CEO of a major company doing this?
And so a few of us thought that we could cast a bronze statue of Neil
Jumping inside a wheely bin
To forever memorialise him
I want you to see though, there is nothing odd about what Neil did
In fact, each one of should be willing to do such things
Because if you ask Neil why he does things like this
The answer would be simple
When Jesus serves you on the cross
Then the only logical things to do
Is to serve like Jesus
Whatever that looks like

Now that could be the end of this passage and the teaching point
But I love the way that Mark arranges the encounters of Jesus
Because it's quite deliberate, he's not finished with the teaching point
Immediately after Jesus gives this revolutionary teaching on true greatness
We're introduced to Bartimaeus
A blind beggar on the side of the road
Making a living from people travelling through the city of Jericho
This is the last person you would think of as great

The last person you would want to imitate
And I think this is what Mark wants us to do with this encounter
He wants us to compare Bartimaeus with the brothers James and John
And then he wants us to imitate Bartimaeus.
Bartimaeus may be blind
But he sees Jesus much more clearly than the brothers who have spent three years with him

The sound of the large crowd following Jesus must have pricked his ears
And this is Bartimaeus' chance
Verse 47
He began to cry out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Son of David is a kingly title
David was Israel's greatest King and somehow this blind man knows that Jesus
Is a descendant of the great King
And so he approaches Jesus the king not with a demand but a humble plea
Have mercy on me
Contrast this with the arrogant demand of James and John
"Do whatever we ask of you"

And because Bartimaeus has no status
Many tell him to be quiet
A blind beggar has no place with the royal status of Jesus
But this only galvanizes Bartimaeus to call even louder
"Have mercy Son of David"
And here we glimpse the faith that we've already see in others the last two Sundays
The faith of Bartimaeus
Shows the same Desperate Dependent Trust
That we saw with the bleeding woman
With Jairus the synagogue leader when his daughter was dying
And the friends who brought the paralytic to Jesus

And without fail,
Jesus always responds to faith
The Servant King stops for the blind beggar and calls him over
Because that's the kind of King he is.
And the kingdom he brings welcomes the weak
The broken, the needy, the humble
I love that detail in verse 50
When Bartimaeus realizes that Jesus is calling him
He threw off his coat
The coat was not just his means of warmth
It was his livelihood
Beggars would spread out their cloaks on the ground
So that people would throw their coins on their cloaks
And this meant that even though he was blind
Bartimaeus could gather the coins easily
But Bartimaeus doesn't care about that anymore
He was ready to give up everything to meet Jesus

And then when he has Jesus' attention
Jesus asks the very same question that he asks James and John
"What do you want me to do for you?"
And it is a simple but understandable request
"I want to see"

Jesus said to him in verse 52
"Go, your faith has saved you." Immediately he could see and began to follow Jesus on the road.

This is what it looks like to be a disciple of Jesus
Faith means being served by Jesus
And then to follow him in return
Bartimaeus has been served by the Servant King
And now he will follow Him

Will you follow Jesus and serve like him?

Let Bartimaeus the blind beggar be your model
Don't settle for the worldly greatness of James and John
Find true greatness
By being served by the Servant King
Then serving like the Servant King
Let Jesus be the most important person in the world
The one you follow as your Saviour and your Lord
If you're ready to do that

Dear God,
I'm sorry for my pride.
Thank you for Jesus my Servant King and what he did for me on the cross.
Please help me to be served by Jesus and to serve like him.
Amen

The world we live in
Is run by people who thrive on worldly greatness
Putin, Trump, Musk, Jong Un, Bezos, Tate
Where the strong crush the weak
Where there are winners and there are losers
It's different in the kingdom of God
He welcomes the weak
And He transforms them

Catherine Hamlin grew up in a wealthy family in Sydney
She and her husband Reg were committed Christians
Both of them doctors who went to Ethiopia and established a fistula hospital in Addis Ababa
They ended up staying there for decades
It was where both of them eventually died, first Reg then Catherine
Their inspiration was a verse from the Gospel of Matthew,
Chapter 25 verse 40 quoting Jesus
'whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me'.
The verse hung in the hospital below a picture of Reg after he died.

A fistula is a wound caused during an obstructed birth
And the end result can be uncontrolled discharge of urine and faeces
It can lead to sepsis and death
It is a condition of poorer nations
Where women can't get access to medical treatment during or after birth
And in countries like Ethiopia
Fistulas come with great shame
Husbands abandon their wives who are also often left infertile
Families shun women with fistulas and many are forced to beg to survive
Just like Bartimaeus
Women with fistulas are treated like modern day lepers
And in their time in Ethiopia
The Hamlins performed surgery on 60,000 women
And transformed their lives

One of those women was Mamitu Gashe
Mamitu was pregnant at 14 when she met the Hamlins
She lost her baby and her fistula was severe
The Hamlins did 10 surgeries on her but she was still left with some incontinence
Mamitu's husband was one of the good ones who wanted to stay with her
But she insisted on him marrying someone else
Because she could not have anymore children
Instead she dedicated her life to helping the Hamlins
For what they did for her

Mamitu was illiterate and uneducated
So she started by helping to make beds and cleaning and visiting patients
And the Hamlins saw in Mamitu compassion and intelligence
They decided to get Mamitu to help them with their fistula surgeries

And so Mamitu would place her hand on Catherine's
And so she would learn how to do the fistula operations.
And she showed great skill and great compassion
Because she too was once a fistula patient.
Mamitu Gashe is now one of the world's leading fistula surgeons
It is said that if you are a fistula surgeon in the world
You have been trained by her or trained by someone who was trained by her.
She was awarded the Gold Medal for surgery from London's royal college of surgeons

Deputy CEO of the Hamlin Fistula Foundation, Tesfaye Mamo said of Mamitu
'Mamitu is the most humble woman I've ever met, probably because she comes from a rural area. She's polite, kind and calm, and I've never seen her boast. She's been one of the best surgeons in fistula. I think Catherine's generosity of spirit has been reflected in Mamitu as a surgeon. No one in the world would have as little education but be as skilled a surgeon as Mamitu. When I first heard about her, I thought, How can this happen?'

You know how this happens
Jesus the Servant King
True greatness means being served by Jesus
To serve like Jesus
Let me pray