



Sunday Reflection

Ordinary Time

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 19 September 2021

Pentecost 17

We come to worship seeking Jesus, asking that we might grow in expressing the character of God's kingdom. We come, willing to be great enough to do the small things for God, that we might be small enough for God to do great things through us.

Reflection for this week's Gospel

"Jesus sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'" *Mark 9:35*

An Illustration to set the scene

It was December 2012 and in Burlada, in Spain's Navarre region, a prestigious cross-country race was being run.

The Kenyan athlete **Abel Mutai** – an Olympic bronze medallist – was comfortably in the lead.

But, as he approached the finish line, he started to slow his pace. He clearly thought he had won, but in fact he had become confused and failed to see that the real line was still ten metres ahead.

The runner following him, Spanish athlete **Iván Fernández Anaya**, saw what was going on.

He could easily have taken advantage of his rival's mistake to run past him and win the race. But Iván did something different.

He ran up behind Abel, and, using hand signals, motioned him to the proper finishing line.

Later, Iván said: “I did what I had to do. He was the rightful winner. He created a gap that I couldn’t have closed if he hadn’t made a mistake.”

Anaya’s action impressed everyone but his coach, Martín Fiz, who thought Anaya had “wasted an occasion”. He said, “I certainly would have taken advantage of it to win.”

Fiz added, “The gesture has made him a better person, but not a better athlete.”

But he found it hard to understand how, on that day, Anaya could choose to run a very different race altogether from the one on the track.

Looking at the teaching of the Gospel

The disciples are following Jesus as he completes his ministry round Galilee and starts moving towards Jerusalem.

Jesus is heading for the earthly finishing line of his death, which will precede the ultimate finishing line of his victorious resurrection.

But the disciples do not seem to be ready for this part of Jesus’ course.

They do not understand that the one who is bringing salvation is to be put to death and that his greatness is as a suffering servant.

In the race they are running, the messiah comes as a mighty warrior bearing a sword.

In the disciples' day, greatness centred on the honour and position of an elite protected by wealth and good living.

The disciples were not among this privileged class.

But the kudos of being in this miracle-working rabbi's company was giving them bolder aspirations.

Their arguments about spiritual status give them away.

The disciples' feet follow the king, but they do not have a kingdom mindset.

They want to rise to the top of the system that Jesus has come to turn upside down.

As Jesus teaches them truths they have yet to grasp, they draw back from asking him to help their understanding.

But Jesus does not hold back from questioning them.

He is patient in exposing their misconceptions.

He responds both by articulating a principle and by presenting a person in the form of a child – society's most dependent, powerless and vulnerable member, one lacking even a legal status.

Yet it is their treatment of such a figure, in being generous rather than taking advantage, that most truly reflects a believer's spiritual stature.

How can we reflect on the application to our lives?

In the world around us, greatness is so often seen as being about winning, competing and coming out on top. (Having the most LIKES/followers/or interactions on social media)

In this approach, others' frailties and mistakes become opportunities to advance ourselves rather than reasons to act in their interest.

Even the disciples, who lived alongside Jesus, found it hard to grasp that God's kingdom is grounded in loving servanthood and the cherishing of those who are vulnerable.

Are we tempted to compete and compare ourselves with those around us, even our fellow Christians in church circles?

To what extent do we look for spiritual status in an external position rather than in a submission to Christ that leads to a transformation of our character into his likeness?

As we follow Jesus, we may find him taking us into new territory and ways of seeing things that we find hard to understand.

Our Gospel passage encourages us to **bring our confusions and questions to Jesus and listen for his answer.**

If we withdraw and remain in the priorities of the world we know, we may find that Jesus has some penetrating questions for us, further along the way.

"Jesus sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'"

Mark 9:35

As we pause to reflect today what confusions and questions do we bring to Jesus as we come to worship on this new day?

Please share your response to this reflection to Rector@SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk – did anything speak to you? Did you feel challenged, angered, consoled by something in the words? How did God's spirit move you as you read it? Have you shared the words with someone else? Is this a worthwhile thing to make available to folk whilst we cannot meet for corporate worship to share in word and sacrament? What are your thoughts?

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