



## 25<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR B

In the name of the Father +, and of Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Success, and the pursuit of it, seems to be one of the greatest motivational factors in our society: success in the work place, success on the sports field, success at school and in family life. The pursuit of success involves the pursuit of other things associated with it: the pursuit of fame, or possessions, or wealth: it was the pursuit of success and of massive wages and bonuses that led to the economic recession we are now experiencing. Many of our prime-time television programmes are geared to the success of the participants: Big Brother, The Apprentice, Dragon's Den, to name a few. We are all encouraged to aim for success, and we do, unfortunately, tend to see those who are not as successful as they might be, or as we are, as failures. Of course, there is nothing wrong with being successful at school, or at sport, or at work, but sometimes the means by which that success is achieved, often at the expense of others, can be deeply wrong and sinful. All of us, if we're honest, want to be good at what we do, and to have a comfortable life: all of us want to be successful.

In this morning's Gospel reading, the disciples were arguing about more than success: they were discussing which of them was the greatest. Greatness and success are different, even though people sometimes confuse their meanings. Sometimes we hear on shows such as Britain's Got Talent, or in a sporting contest, that 'so-and-so' is the 'greatest' singer or athlete the world has ever known, meaning that they are eminently successful in their field, and that they have achieved the height of success: greatness. And this greatness is what the disciples were discussing. Unfortunately, we don't know what greatness they were arguing about. Possibly, as many of them were fishermen, it was about who had the biggest boat, or who caught the most fish, or who was the most successful businessman. Hopefully, they were not discussing which of them was the best disciple and follower of Jesus, since the Gospel accounts prove that many of them had a long way to go, not only before they were the greatest, but even before they were successful followers of the Lord.

So, perhaps, the disciples' argument was just a bit of healthy business banter; perhaps their testosterone was getting the better of them, and they wanted to prove who was the alpha-male. Whatever their reason for the argument, Jesus challenges them about it, and, when he does, they don't want to tell him. Of course, Jesus knew already what their argument had been about, and so he uses it as an opportunity to teach them.

As is always the case with Jesus' teaching, it turns our expectations, and the way we behave and view the world, upside-down. 'If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all,' says Jesus to the disciples. This is a radical re-interpretation of all the world holds dear: no longer should there be any pushing to the front of the queue; no longer the wilful pursuit of gain, wealth, possession at the expense of others; no longer putting myself before any- and everyone else. This is Jesus' manifesto for a world in which the humble will prosper; in which the meek will inherit the earth. Jesus is teaching the disciples, and us, that the values of this world, and the values of his Kingdom, are vastly different, are diametrically opposed to each other, and that those who profess to be his disciples cannot be so while holding to the values of the world. Humility is the virtue by which the disciple of

Christ recognises their rightful place before their Creator, alongside their fellow creatures, by truly living out Christ's commandments to love God and their neighbour as themselves. By recognising our fellow human beings as beloved sons and daughters of God; by respecting their rights as brothers and sisters of the Lord who died for their sakes as well as for ours, we practise the virtue of humility.

It is interesting that Jesus uses the example of a little child to demonstrate his point. By just placing a child in front of the disciples, Jesus is showing the disciples how their lives should be. For what is a child? A child is dependant upon God and upon its parents; it is trusting; it is loyal; it is teachable; it is willing to learn; it is honest; it is humble. How many of us can honestly say that in our discipleship, and in our dealings with others, we exhibit those characteristics ourselves?

But, whether we like it or not, this is the example that Jesus has set before us of Christian humility and discipleship, and this is the example that we are bound to follow. We are not called by Christ to be childish in our faith, for childishness involves selfishness, tantrums, the desire to get our own way: none of these are Christian virtues. Rather, Christ calls us to be child-like: to be loyal, trusting, faithful, honest, willing to learn from him, humble. By welcoming a little child, the disciples welcomed the characteristics and virtues of Christ's Kingdom, and by welcoming those virtues and putting them into practice, they were welcoming the Lord himself, and his Father who sent him.

This is the example that we are called to follow today: Jesus' teaching was not meant only for the disciples. We are called to, by faith, welcome the little child whom Jesus sets before us, and to put upon ourselves the virtues exhibited by that little child, for in doing so, we, too, put on the virtues of the Kingdom. Jesus wants, and calls, us to be humble, faithful, loyal to him; willing to learn trusting and honest. These virtues are absolutely vital in the life of the Christian, in our attitude towards God, and in our attitude towards one another. The community of the disciples was fractured by their argument about who was the greatest, and by their lack of humility, and child-likeness of faith. What ruptures are caused in our lives, and in our church, because we do not put on the virtues of Christ and allow ourselves to be child-like before him?

We learn from Jesus that whoever welcomes the weak, defenceless, vulnerable child in his name, welcomes him and his Father. It is in our weakness, defencelessness and vulnerability, that we are called to come, in faith, to our Lord; allowing ourselves to be taught by him and our lives to be formed by him.

While the disciples were arguing they did not listen to Jesus' prophecy about his death and rising again, and they did not understand and were afraid to ask him what he had meant. Let us not be like the disciples, and be so concerned with worldly greatness, worldly success, that we miss what our Lord is trying to say to us. Let us not allow the eyes of our faith to become clouded by ambition, for, as S. James teaches, 'Wherever you find jealousy and ambition, you find disharmony and wicked things of every kind being done.' Let us not be so concerned with arguments and trivialities in our daily lives, and also in our church community, that we fail to listen to Jesus, and allow ourselves to be taught by him.

Our Lord has placed before us the child-like qualities of humility, gentleness, honesty, trustfulness and faithfulness, for us to put upon ourselves and imitate, if we truly want to be his disciples. They are not easy qualities to cultivate, but through prayer, the sacraments and perseverance, we will master them, and we will never know we have done if we are truly humble. Success, ambition and greatness in the world, are not bad things to achieve if they are achieved honestly and with due regard for others; but surely success in our discipleship, perseverance in faith and practice of Christian virtues are more desirable than worldly gain. Success, ambition and greatness may be what the world tells us we need to achieve; but Jesus

tells us something different: 'If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all.' With these words of Jesus in your hearts and in your minds, go out from this place, and be his instruments in turning the world upside-down.

Amen.