**20th September 2009**

**Call to worship**

We come today to consider care, humility, and servanthood and what is greatness

[A gathering prayer](javascript:void(0))

Loving, gracious God,  
who does not put us in order – greatest to least,  
best to worst, loved most to loved least,  
or any other order:  
be with us as we spend time  
with one another and with you.  
Help us to listen to you as you speak to us  
and challenge us, love us and encourage us.  
Amen.



[A prayer of approach](javascript:void(0))

Lord God, you call us to live our best lives  
– for you, with you, in you.  
We may sometimes pause to smell the coffee or the roses,  
but we are often too busy to take time to be aware of you  
– that you are with us, in us, and in those around us.  
Quieten our hearts now to recognise you in this place today.  
Help us to reach out to one another with love,  
care and compassion,  
so that we can all live our best life for you.  
Amen.



[A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness](javascript:void(0))

*The response after each petition is:*  
Lord, please forgive me,  
and teach me my rightful place in you.  
  
*(Take a moment to think about what jostling for position*  
*means to you. Where do you see yourself in relation to others?)*  
  
Jesus said: ‘Anyone who wants to be first must be last.’ Lord,  
for the times I’ve put myself first, or argued with people,  
because I think I know better than them or that I am better  
than them…  
  
For the times when I don’t want to be a servant because I think  
I’m capable of greater things…  
  
When I don’t recognise Christ in those around me because I’m  
too busy looking out for myself…  
  
When I don’t understand what people mean, perhaps not  
understanding their feelings of fear or inadequacy…  
  
When I jostle for position, rather than being happy where you  
put me…

Assurance of forgiveness

You challenge us, Lord, when we do wrong.  
You get us to focus by using questions,  
even though you know the answers.  
Your image is present in each one of us.  
When we confess our sins,  
you are always there to forgive us.  
We stand now, humbly in your presence. Forgiven.  
Acknowledging that you are the greatest (keep silence).  
Amen.



[A prayer of thanksgiving](javascript:void(0))

Thank you, Lord, that we can always find our place in you.  
Thank you that we belong to you,  
and no one can take that away from us.  
We are secure in your loving arms.  
We need never be afraid to ask you anything.  
Thank you for the people who give us a cup of water,  
and much more, because we belong to you.  
Thank you for the times we can meet blessing with blessing.  
Amen.



**Focus Scripture: Mark 9:30–37**

**A member of Water Lane United Reformed Church (URC) in Bishop's Stortford, has been made a dame in the Queen’s birthday honours.**

Elizabeth Gardiner, a solicitor who helped draft the government's coronavirus pandemic legislation, was honoured for her services to the government and the legislative process and is now a Dame Commander of the Order of the Bath (DCB).[[1]](#endnote-1)

She is now one of the country's leading civil servants.

The Revd Roy Fowler, Minister of Water Lane URC, expressed his joy:

“Everyone at Water lane URC is absolutely delighted that Lizzie has been made a dame in the recent birthday honours list and for the affirmation of the really important work that she does regarding creating government legislation.

"While we are aware that she does something important in her daily work, we also know Lizzie the person, who along with her husband, gets stuck into church life, reading from the Bible, welcoming people at the door and helping with serving coffee."

I mention this not just because we need people to fill up our rotas and get the church functioning again, we need people to serve in the most mundane of ways – like serving the coffee, whether you are a dame or not – but also because todays reading has Jesus saying that the measure of greatness is about service.

Last weekend Emma Raducanu won the US Open Tennis. She achieved greatness and made a nation rejoice. It was a tremendous performance. Children in the playground. Contestants on TV’s *The Apprentice*. They all vie to be the best, the greatest. This desire is of course not limited to children or participants in reality TV shows. We find it in most walks of life.

Maybe adults are a little more subtle in their efforts, but only to a point! A broader question is: How do we measure ‘greatness’? There seem often to be links to wealth, influence and status. Those who have the most are at the top of society and are considered (by some, at least) as the greatest. Those with the least are at the bottom. And it was as true in Jesus’ society as it is in ours. The disciples’ conversation about who was the greatest could be what, in today’s world, we might call a desire for upward mobility. But is this how it should be? Jesus seems to turn it all upside down: to welcome the least (an unnamed child) is to welcome God! So, who is really the greatest?

 Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.’ Mark 9.35

The Bible passage has Jesus using the example of children – not to sentimentalize them but to teach about the importance of service and the way we welcome and include people as the true way of greatness.

Some years ago St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City was seeking a new president. Over one hundred candidates applied for the position. The search committee narrowed the list to five eminently qualified persons. Then somebody came up with a brilliant idea: let's send a person to the institutions where each of the five finalists is currently employed, and let's interview the janitor (caretaker) at each place, asking him what he thinks of the man seeking to be our president. This was done and a janitor gave such a glowing appraisal of William MacElvaney that he was selected President of St. Paul's School of Theology.

Somebody on that search committee understood, in a flash of genius, that those who live close to Christ become so secure in his love that they no longer relate to other people according to rank or power or money or prestige. They treat janitors and governors with equal dignity. They regard everybody as a VIP. Children seem to do this intuitively; adult Christians have to relearn it.

It is a telling little piece of scripture in verse 32: "But they did not understand." That's a picture that can be hung in the halls of the museum of humanity. When confronted by true greatness, we simply do not see it. That's what happens to the disciples.

One day Jesus is passing through Galilee with his disciples. We are told that he did not want anyone in the area to know where they were? Why is that? Maybe because, he had something important to tell them. It was a strategic part of his plan. "The Son of Man" he explains, "is going to be handed over into the power of men and they will kill him," now listen to what he says here, "and after three days he will rise." There it was. The whole plan laid out before them. The crucifixion and the resurrection. They should have been curious. They should have asked questions. They could have seen the significance. But the best they could muster up was a blank stare and silence. They could not understand it because it did not meet their measure of greatness.

How do we grow to the point that we stop measuring people by their successes and start regarding people for their service, for their sacrifices? What is greatness in the kingdom of God? In the modern world, influencers are powerful because they shape the spending habits of people who aspire to be important or simply ‘on trend’. Here, Jesus challenges the understanding that greatness means being important or ‘on trend’.

Jesus and his disciples were coming to the town of Capernaum. As they entered the house where they would be staying, he asked his disciples, “What were you arguing about on the road?” But they kept quiet, says the writer of Mark’s Gospel, because on the way they had argued about who was number one among them.

The disciples were human just like you and I are human. Who doesn’t want to stand out? Some of the greatest people who have ever lived were also among the most ambitious.

It is said that Michelangelo prayed: “Lord, grant that I may always desire more than I can accomplish.”

The disciples were human beings. They wanted their names to be in lights just as you and I want to stand out from our peers. There is nothing wrong with that as long it does not cause us to mistreat others or betray our values. My guess is Jesus wanted them to be ambitious because ambitious people get things done. He just wanted them to be ambitious in the right way.

Walter Wink comments that ‘Jesus doesn’t condemn ambition or aspiration; he merely changes the value to which they are attached. He does not reject power, but only its use to dominate others.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Jesus is trying to teach the disciples an object lesson about greatness, about servant hood, about leadership. He is saying to them and to us, "Have you lost the childlike joy and love and faith that once were yours?"

So in this passage there is the issue of who is going to succeed as the next leader? Who is the greatest?

When you were a child, did you have a friend, a very best friend? Some adults have the pleasure of enjoying childhood friends all through life. For many adults, however, that is not the case. Not all relationships are long-term and lifelong. A work group disbands at the completion of a project. Conference roommates say goodbye and move on. An interim minister is with a congregation for a time and then is gone. A friend takes ill and dies. A couple with whom you have been friends divorce and move their separate ways, including out of your life.

The coming and going of such relationships creates vulnerability. We may feel a longing to continue what can no longer be continued. We may find in those experiences a sense of our own mortality. How can we continue caring for one another? How might we feel cared for?

Jesus addresses the disciples in the focus passage with a difficult word of departure. It comes on the heels of trying experiences that likely left the disciples wondering what – and who – would come next. In the readings, we are offered wisdom about the vulnerability and gift in our relationships with God and one another. We encounter wisdom that calls on us to practice welcome and caring as individuals and communities.

While Peter may not be mentioned by name in Mark 9:30–37, his presence is very much there. Verse 33 relates, “they came to Capernaum.” Peter’s home was in Capernaum. It may well be that the house mentioned later in that verse is Peter’s. There is even an archaeological site in Capernaum that some claim to be the house of Peter.

An even more significant presence of Peter in relation to this text comes in the community to whom and from whom Mark wrote. Some scholars believe Mark’s gospel was directed to the Christian communities in Rome. Still others attribute Peter as the source of much of the material in Mark.

More readily established is the leadership role of Peter in the Christian communities of Rome, where tradition places his martyrdom under Nero. The dates for Peter’s death range from 64 CE to 67 CE, roughly coinciding with the time of the writing of Mark.

So consider the possible connections between the scene in Mark 9:30-37 and the “scene” in the community out of which Mark was first written.

Jesus tells of his imminent departure. The disciples react not simply with fear that limits understanding, as in verse 32. Verse 34 reveals their ensuing discussion about “who was the greatest.” It would be a logical question to consider – for if Jesus would soon be gone, what would happen to their community? Who would become the leader (“the greatest”)?

A similar situation faced the first readers of Mark. Peter had been martyred between 64-67 AD. This was about the same time that most scholars believe Mark’s gospel to have been written. If the fear of losing key leaders was becoming more and more real, what would happen to this early Christian community? Perhaps Mark’s community is asking, “Who will take leadership roles if current leaders are killed?”

Jesus’ reply speaks to both the community of disciples and the community of the early church – indeed, it speaks to us as well. Who is going to take it on? Where will the church get its next leaders from? What kind of leaders?

Leadership was not to emerge from scrambles for the top or claims to greatness. Leadership in Christ’s community is to arise in servanthood. As if to put an exclamation point on this, Jesus embraces a child and declares “whoever welcomes one such child welcomes me.”

Children in Jesus’ time were without standing or power in society – yet, such a one becomes the “stand-in” for Christ.

it’s important not to overly spiritualize or sentimentalize the story. Put simply, childhood in the ancient world was a perilous time. Disease, war, gender preference, and social hierarchies pushed most children to the margins of society, if they survived childhood at all.

By taking a child in his arms and placing that child in the very midst of the disciples (Mark 9:36), Jesus was not simply promoting a “warm and fuzzy” spiritual principle. Rather, he was advocating a radically new and just ordering of society. And by means of such a

highly prophetic action, he instituted a demanding model of belief and practice within all emergent faith communities. It was about the relinquishment of power and place in favour of a state of raw and tender vulnerability, even unto suffering and death. As we surely know, this was the final outcome of Jesus’ faith journey.

The child-like path is not an easy one to take or follow. It continually undermines societal pressures for status, success, superior knowledge, or idealized images of how we should be.

This seems utter folly in the eyes of the modern world, but an enduring spiritual truth so well expressed by the writer of Psalm 131:

*O God, my heart is not lifted up,*

*my eyes are not raised too high;*

*I do not occupy myself with things*

*too great and too marvellous for me.*

*But I have calmed and quieted my soul,*

*like a weaned child with its mother;*

*my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.*

Similarly, the masterful 20th-century poet, T. S. Eliot, suggested that before the mystery of God and life nothing else was required but a continually surrendered state of heart and mind:

*You are not here to verify, instruct yourself, or inform curiosity or carry report.*

*You are here to kneel...*

The humility of which the psalmist and Eliot speak, gives new eyes and a new heart with which to relate to the world. We start to “see” without judgment or self-importance. We begin to connect out of

a greater sense of empathy, if not friendship.

Anxiety over “who is in charge” is replaced by a call to openness to the ones God brings into our midst. It may be that such openness is aimed at paving the way for God’s surprising choices of leaders for the community, a common theme in the biblical witness – like a youngest-child shepherd anointed as king; like a barren woman birthing John the baptizer; like a manger-born infant who is Messiah. A vulnerable community finds renewal in welcoming God’s new ways and God’s surprising choices.

Jesus takes a child in his arms and declares that to welcome one who is powerless and vulnerable is also to welcome Jesus.

Jesus announces the upside-down word that greatness comes in service.

As church, we form a community that embraces, empowers,

and equips. When we reach out with Jesus’ welcome to all, including those who are vulnerable, we are living in God’s ways.

While we all want our opinion to be the greatest, greatness is found in humility and a willingness to put others first.

Who might Jesus be setting in our midst today while saying, “whoever welcomes one such...welcomes me”?

[Prayers of intercession](javascript:void(0))

Loving Father, sometimes the world is hard to understand. There is so much happening around our globe. Many complex and difficult situations: The ongoing wars in Syria and Yemen, the rapid fall of Afghanistan and unrest in Haiti. There is the continual problem of Coronavirus in particular the impact it is having in much poorer parts of the world and the complex issues connected to the environment and climate change. As we survey the world this week we ask that you give us hope. We are reminded in the Gospel reading today of your death and resurrection. Thank you that we know the transforming power your Spirit can bring. Help us to live in the reality of that hope while we pray for the very real situations around the world.

Lord, thank you that you are in control.  
Help us to put our trust in you.

Gracious God, help us to learn to see the world as you do.  The first will be last and the last first. Thank you for today’s reminder to pay attention to the weak and not just the strong. We pray for those in our communities who are struggling at the moment. We pray for those who are on the margins or feel disenfranchised. Help us, as your church, to notice and respond to the needs we see. We also pray for the powerful, for those who lead and govern. May they see the world as you do, may they work to bring equality and restore dignity.

Lord, thank you that you see the people our society often disregards as unimportant.  
Help us to put our trust in you.

God of all, teach us how to welcome others. We are all welcome in your kingdom. Thank you that you see us and know us and that your welcome is deep and personal. During this week help us to be particularly aware of the welcome we offer others. May this church be a place of real welcome, a place where people feel they are seen and known and feel loved and secure. Thank you for the challenge in today’s reading to welcome the very least in society, help us to work out what this looks like for us.

Lord, thank you that you are a God of welcome to all.  
Help us to put our trust in you.

Heavenly Father, help us to keep learning about your kingdom. Thank you that you took time to teach your disciples. Thank you that you showed them a new way to live. Thank you that you turned the wisdom of their world upside down and showed the disciples a new way to think and behave. Help us to allow your words to transform us and to change the way we think and behave.

Lord, thank you for the wisdom we find in the Bible.  
Help us to put our trust in you.



[A sending out prayer](javascript:void(0))

Lord, Jesus,  
may we go out into the world to shine with your love,  
listen with your ears  
and speak words of kindness and hope  
to everyone we meet – in your name.  
Amen.

1. https://urc.org.uk/latest-news/3850-water-lane-urc-member-receives-damehood-from-the-queen.html [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. (*– From* Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination *by Walter Wink, copyright © 1992 Augsburg Fortress Publisher*) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)