

Heavenly Father, give us faith to receive your word, understanding to know what it means, and the will to put it into practice; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The first thing I would like to say this evening / morning, is that I will not be speaking about the first reading from the Book of Proverbs. I'm going to chicken out of that one and leave well enough alone. Our gospel reading for today gives far more fertile ground for preaching from my point of view.

This week's gospel reading is at its heart a commentary on power and greatness. We live in a time when greatness and power have become central to how we view so many things in life. Much like the last US election was about making 'America Great Again', the political discourse in our own country has become about who is able to lead us as a nation into greatness. In sport, we idolise those who are the best, and tend to ignore those who don't perform to the expected standard. Even in the life of the church, we have tended to hail those Bishops, clergy and churches which are doing the most exciting and innovative things and have suggested that those who don't are somehow letting the team, and God, down. Yet Jesus gives us something very different to consider in today's gospel.

As in last week's gospel, Jesus once again tells his disciples that he will be betrayed, killed, and raised on the third day. And, as with last week, the disciples once again did not understand what he was saying, even though this was the second time he'd told them. They were too afraid to ask Jesus about the meaning of his teaching. They seem to follow the motto, "It is better to remain silent and appear like a fool, than to open one's mouth and remove all doubt."

When Jesus then asks what they were talking about on their journey, they're too embarrassed to admit they were arguing about which one of them was the greatest. While we don't know the content of their argument, the issue for the disciples may have been, 'Who will succeed Jesus?' If he is going to be put to death, as he says, who will become the leader after he is gone? Maybe that is why they are embarrassed when Jesus asks them what they are talking about. And so he tells them, "Whoever wants to be first – that is, greatest – must be last and be a servant to all." The servant here is a diakonos, from where we get the title 'Deacon', which means one who waits on tables. The disciples do not think of themselves as waiters. They see themselves as followers of a powerful leader.

Greatness, they assume, implies power, accomplishment, fame, wealth, and all the other things that make things go your way. But that's not what Jesus tells them. And to drive his point home, he scoops up a young child into his arms and tells them that whoever welcomes a child like this welcomes him.

Jesus' is trying to say to his disciples that perhaps greatness isn't what life is all about, and that they need to have a bit more humility and less arrogance if they want to seek to follow him.

As we continue this week in our Season of Creation, we are reminded that the advancement of the human species to become the most powerful greatest species in the history of our planet has come at an enormous cost to the natural world around us. Thousands of other species on our planet have been hunted into extinction, while thousands of other species have become extinct through the incursion of human habitats into areas which for hundreds of thousands of years were free from human development. In recent centuries we have seen parts of the natural world utilized for its resources, which have been important to human thriving, but which increasingly have been pillaged for human profit and greed. God's creation has been seen as something which has been provided for us to plunder at our will, with little regard being given for the plants and creatures which inhabit them.

In the quest for human greatness, we have failed to have the humility and responsibility towards the rest of God's creation, which may have made the human species wealthy beyond belief, but has robbed us of our relationship with the created order and which has made us the poorer for it.

And we have also seen that the seemingly ever upward trajectory of human history has been halted for the moment by the tiniest of organisms. A virus has brought economies and lives to a screeching halt. And yet we still live with the hubris to believe that this is only a minor glitch before we can resume our ascendancy over the world, until the latest variant brings us crashing back to earth once again.

This is not to say that we can't generate wealth, or jobs or that we can't use the resources around us to live good lives. What I am suggesting is that perhaps we need a little bit more humility as we deal with Creation.

The definition of greatness Jesus offers to his disciples is totally at odds with how we view greatness both then and now. Jesus asks his disciples to imagine that true greatness lies in service by taking care of those who are most vulnerable, those our culture is most likely to ignore. In our day we can extend this care beyond our human brothers and sisters and to extend that care to the natural world around us, God's creation.

Jesus once again upends his disciples' notions of greatness and power. The disciples lack the imagination to envision a world as different as the one Jesus holds out to them. Jesus tells his disciples that we gain greatness not by muscling our way through life, but by living lives of service, by caring for all that is powerless and vulnerable in God's world.